THE MILLIONAIRESS

JULIAN RALPH

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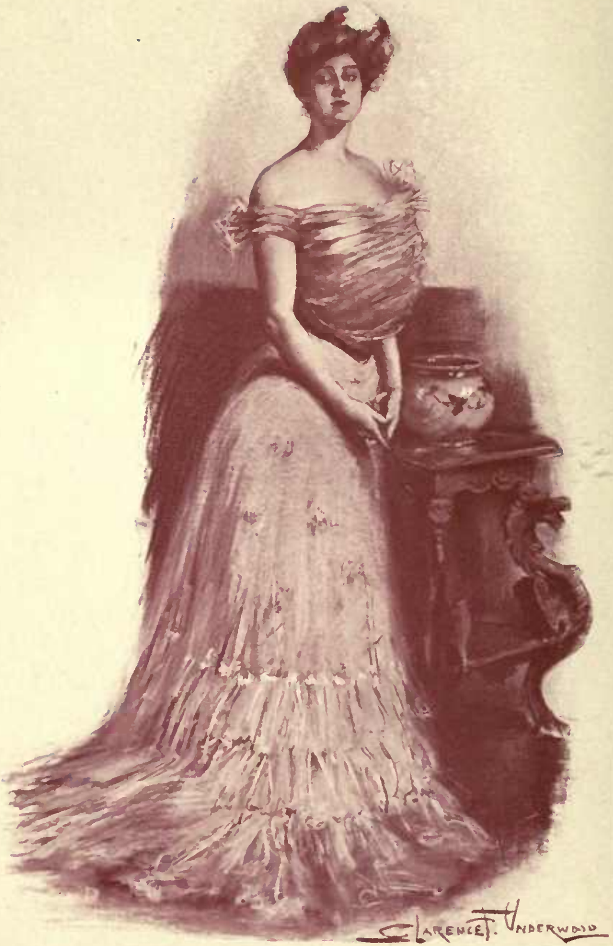
CLARENCE F. UNDERWOOD

THE MILLIONAIRESS

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BY JULIAN RALPH

ILLUSTRATED
BY C. F. UNDERWOOD

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TO MY MOTHER

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The Millionairess

I.

ORDERING AN ADVENTURE FOR ONE

> "Why, I, in this weak, piping time of peace,
> Have no delight to pass away the time." — *Richard III.*

THERE is a queer little German restaurant in William Street, near the Brooklyn Bridge — in New York — which is a perfect reproduction of the typical tavern of a small Fatherland village. In it, not long ago, sat two noted writers for the newspapers. The one was Colin Chester, round, rosy, double-chinned, all and always in black, suggesting the well-fed priest by face and form and frock, and tidy, almost soapily, clean. The other was Courtlandt Beekman, who was slender, tall, and commanding in both face and build. Further distinguishing a face whose shape was the product of generations of refinement, were steady, grey eyes between a lofty brow and a square chin. He dressed like an Englishman, which is to say always comfortably, and was now wearing a lounging suit of loose reddish tweed. Both men would have denied what I have said of their position as writers, but, to begin again with Chester, every newspaper man and thousands of others so insisted; and they knew and were right. He was both a political writer and a considerable force in politics, not unused to being asked by statesmen for advice, and not beneath commanding, and even disciplining, them when he thought best.

Beekman was of another sort. He was great in newspaperdom only because he had performed two or three notable feats in that profession — reporting a revolution in South America, an interview with the Czar, a study of the Armenian question, and another of the plague in the Far East. In fact, he was a rich young bachelor of thirty-two, given to amusing himself with serious undertakings in exploration, big game shooting, and, as he would say, " spying upon his neighbours," by which he meant travelling and observing his fellow men in the largest sense. If he was a journalist it was only because the others were proud to reckon him such. Journalists do not keep a town house in New York, a ranch in California, chambers in London, a yacht, and a broker. Beekman did. Other journalists are not in the "Four Hundred," at home in the Carlton Club in London, asked to put up at "Government House" whenever they stop in their travels, and on the friendliest terms with the Whistlers, Sardous, Roseberys, Ibsens, Rostands, Lenbachs, Kiplings, and men of cultivation and renown everywhere. Beekman was. Yet he and Chester were great friends, touching each other at a dozen sympathetic points, and frank as boys with one another.

"Do you want an adventure?" It was Chester who spoke.

"There is none to be had — not this side of Fez," Beekman replied.

"Some friends of mine," continued Chester, "the nicest people I know, have a dining-club, which is a mere expression of, or sort of charging battery for, a camaraderie unlike any other which I know in America. The men are all distinguished and successful in various professional walks of life, are all well-informed and broad and interesting. Well-to-do and refined Bohemians — that is what they are. And their wives match them. They are as much in the thing as the men. We number nine or ten couples, and only two unmarried members."

"It sounds — "

"Never mind how it sounds. A very great lawyer is one. An architect of note is another, a sculptor known all over the world is a third. I can name no names, but you will know of them if you do not know them. They are the very best, I tell you. Well, their peculiarity is that they take their rest and fun and pleasure together. They all go to the theatre in a party. They take their holidays together — in the woods, by some lonely lake in Minnesota, in some little village in Maine — anywhere to be by themselves, for they are as much as a cityful when they are in force, so far as fun goes. No woman is any man's wife when she is with the club; that is to say, she and her husband are finable if seen together. So we pair off in new couples, twice a day perhaps, all trusting one another so much that our trustfulness never occurs to us. We know books, pictures, music — whatever is worth while. There is not a fool in the club. I want you to join."

"As the missing fool?"

"Don't try to be one. Listen. I ask you to join. The others desire it, but, not knowing you, cannot invite you."

"It sounds —" Beekman began.

"Damn how it sounds. Will you join, if only as a favour to me?"

"It sounds interesting," said Beekman, "but I am only here an occasional week or two in an occasional year."

"I know, but you want to keep up with what's going on, and to be in whatever's the best. This costs you nothing when you are away. Each of us pays only for what he actually gets. I tell you, these people are the very best. Perhaps you will be in New York more often if you make one of us."

"Never mind more argument," said Beekman. "I will join your club. Do you know, I felt that this was coming? I ran down here to see you because something pulled me to you. I knew you would propose something. I knew that I must do it, whatever it was, and I felt that it was to influence the rest of my life."

"What a fakir you are, Beekman, with your pretended Oriental second set of senses!"

"I am not faking, Chester, believe me. I have never yet been deceived by such premonitions. You can learn to will them to come, as I learnt how in Japan, and I will tell you how to do it if you like, though it is not a thing one can tell to everybody. It certainly is not faking."

"But you got my urgent letter asking you to come here?"

"I beg your pardon. I got no letter. You sent it to my house? But I have not been there; I came in from Lakewood only an hour ago. However, never mind all that. I will go with you to your club. It's to-night, is it not? Very well. I will dress and be ready whenever you say."

"In two hours, then — at seven," said Chester. "I will call for you in a cab, and you must submit to be blindfolded; also, when you arrive you will be cross-examined, and you must answer fully and truthfully, with the knowledge that every word you say is being taken down in shorthand, for these examinations form the archives of the club — its only records."

"It sounds very —" but again Beekman was forbidden to say more.

"Never mind how it sounds; you would better consider the soundness of what I have offered you. Be ready at seven. I'll call for you. Now, then, toss off your beer and begone."

"Beer?" Beekman exclaimed. "Beer! in the face of such an adventure? And where ladies are concerned? Ah, the beer is here, is it? Well, let us present it to the waiter, and let us drink, in the clear, cold, liquefied amber of *Rudes* — or *Deides* — or some other *heimer* of the Rhineland, to the pure, the sweet and simple, the ideal — what is the other name of your club, by the way?"

Thus with the apparent ease of plucking a peach from a tree was it arranged that Beekman was to become a member of the Beaux Arts Club. Though lightly described in another novel, the club was at this time assuming such confidence in its unique position among the artists and the fraternities of the country that it was taking upon itself to knock at the doors of the Capital. Its effort there was to stir the nation with an appeal for that which all Americans who love their country and take pride in its progress are beginning to demand: an order of National Merit, carrying with it a medal, at the President's disposal, for that person who, in each year, produces some work of art or of practical use which reflects credit upon us all as a people. Whether the members of the Beaux Arts Club secretly hoped that they might themselves be chosen as the nucleus or chrysalis of the new order we can only guess. Being Americans, who set no limit upon their aspirations, and each of whom considers the best of everything none too good for him or her, it is more than probable that this superb stroke of fortune — or, as they would have said, "splendid demonstration of wisdom on the part of the Government" — was one of the things for which they hung up Christmas stockings.

It may have seemed to Courtlandt Beekman, on being urged to join the club, that the plucking of a ripe peach was a just simile of the ease with which he was to be launched into this coterie. He was to discover, later, that no other man had ever been asked for his company in that circle, and that even in his case the slow ripening of a peach served but poorly to compare with the process of cautious delay and deliberation which had prefaced the final step of extending this invitation. Not as a man who had wrested honours from four great nations by his work as an explorer, but as one known to all students and enlightened sensualists as the translator of a hundred of the most precious poems of Persia, he could plead for a place in the Beaux Arts Club. But these merits were merely considered as proofs of the nature of his talents and the direction of his tastes. He was really taken in because he added to these gifts the powerful possessions of wealth, youth, and ambition, which gave ground for the hope that he might, under the spurring of his comrades, become a light to their feet and a strong hand to the right arm of the society.

Only the governors and leading spirits of the club were in its little offshoot, known to them as "the Boozers," from a play upon the words "beaux arts." Only these, their wives, and the rich Miss Laura Lamont, — the necessary exception to every hard and fast rule, — met once a month to dine and make merry together. Beekman was taken into the more serious circle by means of this side door, because it was felt that, as a brilliant member of high cosmopolitan society, he would bring to the rest as much as he received, and thus enrich their common treasury of the delights of good fellowship.

II.

THE RENDEZVOUS ON THE ROOF

"What things have we seen done at the Mermaid!" — *Beaumont.*

COLIN CHESTER whispered to the driver, when Beekman had stepped into the coupé, that he was to drive down Fifth Avenue to Eleventh Street, straight across Eleventh Street to Greenwich Avenue, up that and Seventh Avenue to Twenty-third Street, and thence to the Rhinelander Flats, that towering pile of stylish apartments capped by artists' studios and bedrooms, which rises like a boar's tusk above the otherwise nearly even dentations of the neighbourhood sky-line. As the coupé turned for the first time Beekman, who had been heavily blindfolded by a white silk muffler, tied across his eyes, remarked "Eleventh Street, going west."

"Oh, damn it, old chap," Chester exclaimed, petulantly; "if you are going to practise that second sight business of yours, and always know where you are, there is no use going."

"All right, old fellow," Beekman answered. "'I will be good,' as the girlish Victoria answered, when they woke her, to tell her she was queen. But you had better talk to me — and in the most absorbing manner — if you wish me to walk into your trap with none of my wits about me."

The rendezvous of the club on this night was at a studio which J. Delafield Wright, the celebrated painter, had built upon the roof of the Rhinelander Flats. He had gone up there at first to study the roofs of New York, and especially the smoke and steam effects, which were multitudinous and peculiar. These he caught in a painting, which, while wholly impressionistic and very beautiful, nevertheless suggested, better than any thousand views or descriptions, the true idea of New York's foremost place as a city of manufactures. Pleased by the light, the absence of all obstruction to the view, and by the freedom from intrusion, he built there a studio of bamboo and canvas — which blew over to New Jersey, or into the North River, a fortnight later, in a little thunder-squall. Then he put up the present large structure of steel and glass, and found that, by letting none except his closest friends into the secret of the studio's existence, he could work there in peace, while keeping his former studio below-stairs, from which bores and beggars could be turned away as fast as they came — which he used to say was at the rate of three an hour, for ten hours each day. It was his custom to decorate this roof studio differently for each meeting of the Beaux Arts Club, when these were held there. Travel and long residences in Holland, France, Japan, Italy, Spain, and Mexico, where he had spent money lavishly for what he considered most beautiful in each land, made it possible for him to produce a very complete effect as well as a new background on each occasion. On this night of Beekman's visit, the theme of the decorations was Japanese Art — that beautiful fruition of centuries of cultivated taste which has been discarded and abandoned in a day, as it were, by that misguided race; that art which our pioneers in taste discovered a quarter of a century ago, and which the dull and ignorant world still leaves them to enjoy. Wright had gone to Japan late, but, by perseverance and a great outlay of money, had managed to do better in collecting the débris of Japan's golden age than any one in all the world except one or two early collectors. He collected with the fever of one who comes upon a palace ahead of a devastating army.

"I felt as one does who rushes into a burning museum," he said. "I knew that whatever I could save had few or no mates or replicas, and that none could or would ever be made in the future."

Thus does the enlightened traveller feel who finds himself in Japan. Its art life is dead, and what remains of its living reminders is a mockery. All has been exchanged for an unsuitable form of civilisation which is but imitated and may never be attained. But the effects of our own artists in line, in colour-combination, and in composition will continue the richer for these relics of an art which was.

Sketches which Wright had made in Japan were mingled with original paintings by Hokusai, Kunisada, Hokubai, Toyokuni I., Utamaro, and Korin. Of original masterpieces by Hokusai, he exhibited more than are to be seen in both the

British Museum and the great collections of Paris. Porcelain from all the famous places of manufacture were shown in groups, and, often, Wright had put among them the Chinese work of the same sort (the Corean going with the old Satsuma ware, of course), to show at once the course of Japanese art from its sources — which, in the case of China, still holds the mastery in many lines. Carvings in ivory, bamboo, and jade-stone, painted and carved wood from many temples, as well as gorgeous costumes sufficient for a theatrical spectacle, all contributed to make a splendid as well as princely display.

The splendour of the studio was not permitted to burst upon Beekman immediately upon his arrival. Led, still blinded, from the cab, he was made to mount the seemingly unending stairs — lest the swift elevator should betray the identity of the building. Arrived upon the roof, which was as hard and solid as the street, he was asked to be seated in order that he might be catechised according to the formula of initiation.

All the men and women of the club stood about him, to listen — and to interrupt when they were so inclined. They were a distinguished-looking company. The men in their evening dress betrayed their nationality by the strenuous lines in their frank and upraised faces, — lines that told of the almost ferocious earnestness each put into his life-work. The ladies, attired with elegance in full evening dress, carried in their countenances the courage and confidence of all our women, modulated by the dignity with which an American wife, and especially a matron of our race, supports her unexampled liberty. And even in that company, where every man's face exhibited the exalted beauty of high intelligence and assured mastery of his calling, the lion of the group was Courtlandt Beekman. He sat before them like Apollo blindfold and in modern dress.

The company made a pleasing tableau, whose accessories were the clear blue sky, lightly touched by the reflection of the city's lamps, the stars shining in myriads amid the deeper blue beyond, the moon pouring its soft light on the jewelled necks and bare shoulders of the lovely women, and around and beneath them the ceaseless, dull tone of the busy city's life.

Behind the members, at the door of the studio of steel and crystal, were gathered the servants brought by several of the members, according to the usage of the club, — four black men in full waiters' costumes and two women, one of whom was the ever familiar, talkative, and highly privileged Hannah, ready to die for her master, provided she be allowed to laugh and to crack a more or less personal jest or two during the process.

Delafield Wright, acting as master of ceremonies for the evening, raised to his lips a comically huge, funnel-shaped trumpet of pasteboard, in order to put the questions in a roaring yet muffled voice which could not afterward be identified by the candidate, who had been expected to behave as a victim of the coterie should, but who was as calm and imperturbable as an effigy of a man in marble.

III.

AT THE SILL OF THE BOOZER'S DOOR

"Was ever woman in this humour wooed?" — *Shakespeare.*

"YOUR name?" was the first question the master of ceremonies put, with a roar that sent the sound into the windows of a block of dwellings in the next street.

"Courtlandt Beekman."

"Your profession?"

"I have none," said Beekman, "I am always looking for a job."

"You are sober?" This in a tone which seemed to address itself to a cook who was hanging out of a top-story window a block distant.

"I admit it," said Beekman.

"Are you sane?"

"In a world where no one is so," said Beekman, "the question seems barely polite."

"You think well of yourself?" was the next explosion. It was loud enough to startle a maiden in a house just below, who was prinking before her mirror, and who started as if she fancied herself spoken to.

"It must be because I don't know anything, and I know I don't," Beekman made answer.

"Are you married?"

"Beyond repair — to a whole sex."

"Do you respect women?" the interlocutor asked.

"I — er — I —" Beekman stammered. There was a chorus of "Oh! oh!" and "He hesitates," by the ladies.

"No; I am only trying to be careful in my answers. I respect the commonplace, which is the masculine, but I revere the mysterious, which is woman."

"Which women do you most admire?" broke in Mrs. Chester; "plain, homelike women, or learned ones — or advanced women, with missions?"

"Those are merely different frocks which women put on. When they are made complete personalities by marriage, their husbands find them all alike — women and womanly."

"Are you always honest?"

"If I were not I would say I was."

"Will you remain honest all your life?"

"So long as it pays."

"Is it paying now?"

"I am not sure."

"Oh, this is going to be the best chapter in our book of characters," Miss Laura Lamont whispered to the lady beside her.

"Hs — s — s — h," from the lady in question.

"I fancy I shall not know until after I am dead," Beekman went on. "Different persons hold different views. My friend, Mike Bailey, the silver-tongued Tammany chief, steals, takes bribes, corrupts judges, and protects the vicious for money. He tells me frankly that his conscience is a molten hell of remorse, yet he is able to encrust with diamonds the whole body of the woman he loves, and who left her husband because Mike promised she should have jewels to eat if she wished. He says that the Gehenna of a decent man who turns wicked is preferable to the Hades of a man who hears a sweetheart cry for what he cannot give her. Dishonesty pays, is the moral he draws from his own case. I have two other acquaintances: 'Flo-flo,' the human tennisball, and Pierre Daubigny — 'the late Pierre Daubigny,' his friends call him. Flo-flo, as a dancer in the first row at the Alhambra in London, was able to do well by her mother. She put the old lady up in Bloomsbury lodgings, where piano-music floats freely out of a window on every floor of each house, and one always has the British Museum close by for whirling away a hilarious hour. But Flo-flo gave up this enviable state to have herself shot from a huge racquet into a net for three times her dancing salary. Now she is away from her mother most of the time, and is fearful she will be killed each night of her life and two afternoons in the week. In truth, she is certain to do worse than be killed, because she is about to marry a loafer. She will marry him for two reasons: first because he has asked her, and second because she thinks she needs a protector. Flo-flo is honest, and believes that anything honest must pay. Others don't. I? I do not judge her — it is enough for me to look after my own morals."

"You spoke of another case," the cross-examiner roared through the megaphone.

"Oh, yes, Daubigny. You know him. He

used to lead Knickerbocker heiresses to private dinners in rooms strewn knee-deep with roses; hired an opera troupe, and gave 'Faust' in the streets of Nuremberg one night after every one but the watch had gone to bed; used to rent the newest Atlantic flyer and give a concert for a very select few of his acquaintances out at sea on sultry summer nights. At last he has had to decide whether to take a clerkship at one thousand, five hundred dollars a year, or to be a tout for a patent medicine at five thousand dollars a year and expenses paid. He has chosen the touting. He tells me that six drops of his medicine let fall in a ship's hold will eat as many holes in the iron plates, and sink the ship. He is selling his family honour and social position, and cheating both his friends and the public. He does not think that dishonest, and he does think it pays. It is not for me to say."

Laura Lamont now took the great funnel of cardboard and spoke, but she held her lips too far from the mouth of it, and something of her own voice was distinguishable.

"I cannot tell by your answers, sir," she said,

" whether you do or do not respect women. As one of the sex, I would like to know."

At the third word she spoke, Beekman gripped the arm of his chair, and pulled himself up in it, more erectly, while it seemed to those who happened to be looking at him that he must be straining to see through the folds of silk which lay across his eyes.

" Please repeat your question, madam," he said, as a look of pleasurable anticipation took his face captive.

Miss Lamont, thrown out of ease by his manner, and by the sudden and peculiar attention that was concentrated upon her, repeated the precise words she had spoken before, as if they had been learned by rote.

" I cannot tell whether you do or do not respect women. As one of the sex, I would like to know."

" I am sure that you do know," Beekman replied. He spoke with a gravity and gentleness which had not been in his previous speech. " I beg your pardon. What I mean to say is that, if my voice tells you what yours tells me, you are sure of the true answer to your question."

" What a queer jest," said Mrs. Percy Russell, not bothering to use the megaphone.

" It is no jest at all," Beekman retorted, earnestly, and then, collecting himself, he added, to dismiss the topic, " but please continue your torture."

With this unlooked for episode there came a hush at first, and a general movement of uneasiness and surprise. Then the consciousness that Beekman was blindfold and a stranger to every woman in the room broke the suspense, which was finally dispelled by the interlocutor continuing the examination. In the moment before he spoke, however, Laura Lamont, her beautiful face rose red with blushing, first wished herself at home, and then made a secret vow that she would not speak aloud again that night, in order that Beekman might go away without knowing to whom he had addressed himself so strangely. She was vexed and ashamed. These first emotions delayed, for a moment, the suggestion of romance that lay in the situation thus suddenly produced between herself and Beekman — both so young, so wealthy, so brilliant, and so distinguished by their beauty. Be sure this was not lost upon the other women in the room — who felt themselves trembling on the sill of a mental palace of delight.

"You lead a very dangerous life," said the interlocutor. And at the thought which these words suggested Laura softened a little, and, I fancy, felt a slight shudder at the realisation that his life was ever hanging by a slight thread.

"Dangerous life?" Beekman repeated, as if the idea were new to him. "The life of a bird in the air must seem so to a caged bird. I remember that the Hackensack meadows were more vast and awesome to me, the first time I escaped from New York, as a child, than ever the steppes of Russia appeared, later, after a lifetime of travel. At first I could not have slept in the open — not even in my father's back yard — but now that I have slept beneath twenty skies, I know that the greatest joy and health and safety are in the roofless bedrooms of nature. As to the men, women, and animals one meets, if one takes proper precautions, the dangers prove least from them where you at home fancy them the greatest. There are more violent deaths in New York than in Canton, and the wild animals are now nearly all in the 'Zoos.' If you are properly presented to the Sioux Indians or the Matabeles, you are more safe in their camps than anything could render you in certain parts of Paris. I will make a bargain to travel Patagonia all over with a native, and will ride and sleep beside him, knowing that he will neither hurt me nor allow harm to come to me if he can prevent it. That cannot be said of a Bowery 'tough,' and yet you can even take the fangs from such a man if you go to him with credentials he respects, and a manner that discourages trickery. I do not think I lead a dangerous life. You have houses and parks — well, I call New York my home, and the world my park. The difference is only in degree, except that, with much roaming in my park, there has come a development of caution which is like a coat of mail."

Here came a pause.

"Lord!" said Beekman. "How much talky-talky there is to this durbar of yours."

"You are doing the talking."

"But you are pushing the buttons."

"You seem to have queer friends," the spokesman for the club resumed.

"Do you think so?"

"You speak of crooked politicians and human tennis-balls and —"

"Those are not friends — not really," Beekman replied. "Friendships are seldom formed except between infancy and leaving college. After that there is only camaraderie. The best that can happen after college is to gradually find one's self a member of what I call my *Fraternité sympathique du monde*—the order (which really exists) of cosmopolitans, scattered everywhere, in whose circle each nature finds its fellow."

"For example? Speak personally, of yourself, please. It is our rule to require it."

"I suppose my circle must be rather wide, because I like people — as mere beings, as living books to be read. Let me see, in Russia I have for a comrade a second-hand bookseller — a Nihilist, I suspect. Some of the shelves in his shop are secret doors which roll away from the wall, and let us into a room known only to his wife and daughter. There he and I sit and talk of everybody and everything — which about sums up the limit of his extraordinary knowledge. He talks, I should say, and I listen. In London I have two genuine comrades, — a lord who is as fond as I of yachting, and a typewriter girl whose whole mind is given up to the study of what the New Woman is doing, and can do. She has learned five foreign languages in order to post herself upon the women of as many lands. She thinks herself a prophetess, and really is most informing. She is likewise amusing, as when, for instance, she tells me that the most progressive of all women are the American ones, that they plan the railways, design the cathedrals, sit on the bench, are the leading preachers, and are distancing the men at the making of millions. She gets this news, I gather, from assiduous reading of the *Women's Home Bugle.*

"What other comrades have I? In Italy there is a statesman, a duke, who — but we only fish together, and he only fishes to get away from statecraft and care. Oh, one good comrade of mine is a Blackfoot chief, with whom I sit and smoke whenever I can get to see him. He likes me — grunts when I come, and grunts when I go. If ever gentleman was born he is one. I am also comrades with a Chinese gentleman in Chefoo, who takes me to the most disreputable places for the most innocent ends. He hires a bagnio — as is the custom — in which to give me luscious dinners, and brings in talented musicians, lovely singing girls, and waiting maidens — or girls, I should say. He is one of my very few funny comrades. When we are together we roar with laughter over simple games like 'guess-finger;' we romp and frolic like schoolboys let loose. I do not know twenty words of his language, and he does not know one word of any tongue but his own, yet we are chums. We are such chums, that he has even let me see his wife. That is a compliment I value because I can measure it. To have a Chinaman introduce you to his wife is as rare a thing as humility in a grizzly bear."

"You have other comrades? We must know of them to comprehend your character."

"In Benares my friends keep a shop where I sit on the floor, and chew betel leaves while they tell me of the nobler life which admits of no worry or care or concern, either for present ills or future dreads. There, again, I listen while their hearts and mine twine together. In Bombay, when I go there, I instantly seek a Parsi maiden of supreme beauty and distinguished family, who never talks at all beyond a greeting and a parting word. We simply sit and think of friendship. When sitting grows tiresome, we walk through the European streets to the noisy native city, and think on. At last, for a change, we go down to the sands of the bay, where the faithful of her sect gather to pray at the setting of the sun, and we sit on the steps and think farther. Sometimes each holds a hand of the other, as we walk side by side. I have known her for years, and seen her more than a score of times, and yet, at the most, we have not conversed, as you would call it, by speech, above three times."

"What did you talk about then?"

"I asked her once, whether she knew that we could not marry; that it would never do; it would spoil everything for both of us. She laughed and clapped her hands — for her philosophy renders her frank and artless as a child — and she cried, 'Oh, I am so glad you are wise. I had many doubts, but now I know that we shall always be friends — for thousands and thousands of years.'"

"What did you say at another time?" inquired Mrs. Percy Russell, who had obtained the megaphone; indeed, now, all the ladies, except Miss Lamont, were in a cluster around that instrument, and questions eager and numerous flashed from each pair of eyes and strained for flight from each pair of lips.

"I had been away five years and a half, and I half feared she was married. For the very reason she gave me I felt that I should not necessarily know if she were. It was not necessary to put my thoughts into words, for she knew them, and I knew her answers while yet both were unspoken. Oh, I wish she belonged to your club — for your sakes, I mean. You would like her. She has sufficient calm and repose to quiet even this part of Twenty-third Street."

"How do you know this is Twenty-third Street?" Archibald Paton, the novelist, inquired, not caring to use the great pasteboard funnel.

"I think so, that's all," Beekman replied. "One likes at least to think he knows where he is; otherwise one is not at perfect ease."

The flashing eyes of the ladies had clouded at this interruption and, at its ending, from a dozen lips came this whispered question to be put by Mrs. Russell, who still held the trumpet.

"What did the Parsi lady say when you asked her if she was married?"

"I did not ask her — I felt that she had told me, by a communicating wave of thought, that she was still unmarried. Involuntarily, I exclaimed, 'Thank God! I thought —' and she finished the sentence: 'Thought I was married. It would not matter, marrow of my mind and blood of my heart,' she said. 'I would tell my husband, and he would understand.' I said hopefully, 'Perhaps he would be "a friend" like ourselves.' She shook her head. 'You are mind of my mind, essence of that of which I am essence, but a husband would only be part of our dust — his and mine completing an earthly body, as your essence and mine complete an eternal soul.' I considered a moment and would not admit the chance of a catastrophe. 'Why might he not be mind of our minds and soul of our souls? There have been such marriages.' 'Not often — in India,' she replied, without perceiving the humour of localising the fault. And then she added, 'But I shall marry because it is every one's duty, and I shall only marry one who understands that you and I have a sublime mating which proceeds from higher than earthly sources, and must not be broken by such.' "

One or two wholly unimportant questions were put by the interlocutor, in order that the other members of the club might slip noiselessly away, into the studio. This accomplished, Colin Chester removed the bandage from Beekman's eyes, which showed him only a company of six negro servants instead of the ladies and gentlemen he might have supposed were around him, and might have expected to see. Colin Chester had remained outside, in order to further deceive him.

" Your examination is concluded," Chester said. " A committee is now passing judgment upon you. The rest of our members you see before you."

" I have always enjoyed what I have read of the Sullivan Street Poker Club," said Beekman. " I didn't know it had grown stylish, and moved up-town."

" H'm," a waiter whispered to Hannah, " de gentleman ain't showin' off 's much as he thinks he is — calling us Sullivan Street trash."

" Mebbe he don't understand Affero-Americans," Hannah replied, " but he knows de game ob poker fo' he done got a raise out o' you, maghty easy."

IV.

IN WHICH SOME CHARACTERS TAKE THEIR PLACES

"Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?" — *Shakespeare.*

CHESTER vanished, saying that he would be gone but an instant. It was fully three or four minutes before he returned, and then his face was clouded. With an effort which Beekman could not miss seeing, Chester smiled as he said: "I congratulate you upon being one of us."

"And what was the trouble?" Beekman inquired. "Come, you should play the game. In such a case I should be left to judge whether I ought to accept membership. A doubtful compliment is not to my taste."

"There is no doubt about it," Chester replied. "One member out of nineteen voted against you. I suppose you saw my disgust written on my face. It was because such an incident has never occurred with us before, and especially because whoever voted so has not revealed himself — or herself — and we cannot find out what prompted the vote. I am sorry you guessed that something was up, but it's nothing, as you see."

"I think it merely amusing," said Beekman. "Let's go in."

The setting of the scenes in which our characters are to move has caused so much delay in the action of the piece that we cannot add, as we would have preferred to do, a detailed description of the club meeting which now followed. It was only a dinner-party, after all, if you choose to call it so, but it was as family-like and unconventional as if it had taken place in Germany, and yet as brilliant with wit and anecdote, song and fun, as it could only be in America. Out on the roof, at just the right distance to produce a light caress of softest melody, a piano, violin, and mandolin were exquisitely played while the dinner lasted. After the dinner, Delafield Wright told of a partly comical, partly weird experience of his own in Cuba. Laura Lamont sang two dainty Italian serenades, and for, perhaps, the chief bit of the entertaining Archie Paton read his latest short story. It told of a sweet and simple country girl, rich in Christian faith, who came to New York, and began to dabble in the mysteries, philosophies, and mental eccentricities with which the American women of the moment coquet, usually with merely affected seriousness, but which the girl took so gravely that in two years she was left stripped of everything which had made her happy, and which had caused her to be beloved. She was as one turned to marble and unclothed. She threw away God, she laughed at the bare idea of love, she shuddered at the barbaric indelicacy of marriage, children became to her mere symbols of animalism. At last she became a tippler and a gambler and — took too much chloral, and went where she could shock sensible and decent people no longer. The story was, in places, too sermonish and, in other places, too bold and strong in its tone, but the members were never openly critical of one another's best, and only Laura Lamont knew that it was written (and read on this occasion) solely as an attack upon her — a lecture upon her behaviour — as well as with the foreknowledge that she would take it as such.

She had grown accustomed to Paton's assumption of the right to endeavour to school her in his ways of thought, but no amount of practice could harden her to bear unjust and grave aspersions upon her character — even from Archie Paton — without feeling the smart. Yet of late he seemed not to know or care where to stop in the excesses of his fault-finding with her innocent pleasures. Had he taken the trouble to ask her, or to study her life, he would have seen that she had not only quickly tired of the silly crazes of the idle ones of her sex, but had fathomed the reason why American women, unlike all others on earth, flit ceaselessly from one " ism " or " osophy " to another, like birds that hop from perch to perch. But he acted upon his knowledge of her amusements of full eighteen months before, and she could have afforded to smile in spite of the wounds he gave to her pride.

She had read the new literature of the New Woman — or, rather, had dipped into it, for she was too cleanly by nature to read farther than was needed to betray its morbidness — and she had resolved that she could share none of the aspirations of its heroines. She felt that the solution of woman's difficulties reached by the chief women in such unwholesome books as " The

Woman Who Did" and "The Story of a South African Farm," to mention two out of a thousand, required no original genius. To adopt their lives, she saw, was merely to let go of all which healthy women value. Theirs was, in plain phrasing, merely a descent to animal nature, and such lives are not novel, but have been pursued since the earliest centuries by a class of unfortunates which has never before celebrated its defiance of respectability in verse or prose.

She determined that, since men grant full freedom to her sex, she would utilise it in an added womanliness, an emphasised femininity. She would be as brave, strong, resourceful, and independent as possible, but ever gentle and womanly, foreseeing a blessed dependence, later, when love should rule and when she and some beloved "he" should both joy in Love's sovereignty.

"Any sort of a man except a manly man is contemptible. It should be the same with any woman who is not ultra womanly. I will be a woman — and proud of it!" she exclaimed.

In saying this, she meant a woman of the type hall-marked by all the centuries, — a woman preferring the solid treasure of a pure, sweet life to the imitation culture of a Browning guild, elevating the exemplary career of refined and gentle womanhood above the presidency of a Woman's Bulldog Club, and prizing the colour, rustle, and frou-frou of womanly dress above the absurdities of mannish overcoats, waistcoats, and broad-soled shoes.

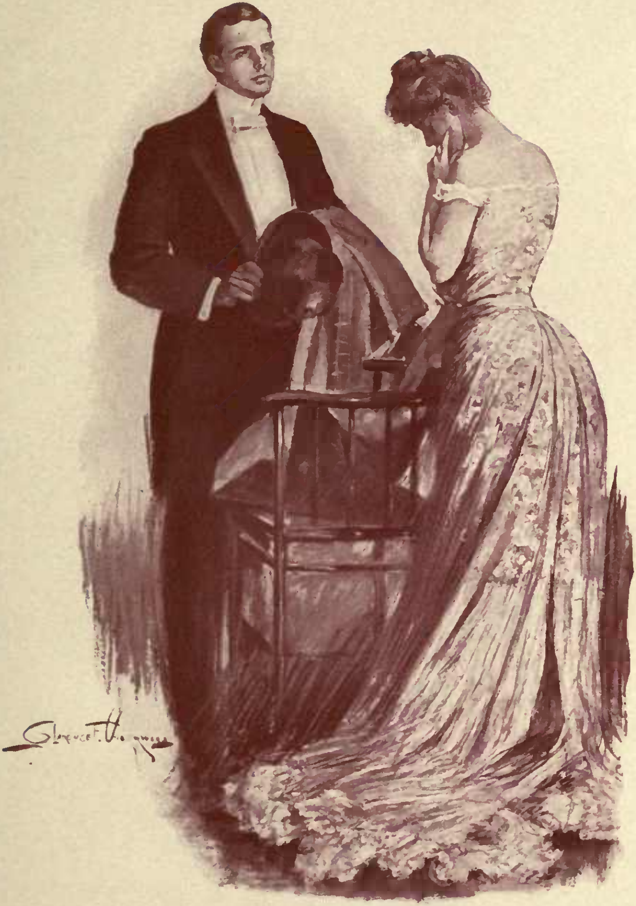
Archie Paton and she were considered to be lovers by all in the club, and these others wondered what was delaying the frank announcement of their relationship. For Laura's part, she had begun two years ago to take it for granted that he would ask, and that she must yield. She was very romantic, you must understand, and he had certainly played a heroic part, when first she met him, in rescuing her from a shocking plight, in which her desperate and unprincipled cousin, Jack Lamont, had placed her in order to force her to marry him and give him the command of her wealth. Some who read this will recognise her as the heroine of another tale, who had since taken her uncle's name of Lamont in obedience to his will.

She was wholly girlish in those days, and her gratitude and admiration for Mr. Paton's fame as a novelist put it out of her mind to question his right to her hand. Now, a long time had passed, and he had shown less and less of the lover's qualities, while still assuming the right to criticise and guide her. He said nothing of marriage, and she was glad to be free. But for his peculiar claim upon her life, she would never yet have given marriage a serious thought.

At the conclusion of the club meeting she hoped to escape the leave-taking of the stranger who had awakened in her heart a timid but delicious fluttering, the nature of which she could not yet define. During the whole evening she endeavoured never once to let Beekman hear her voice, to which he had so strangely called attention. She avoided him, though she longed to do differently. We marvel at the patience of the Church of Rome, which plans for centuries ahead. We can scarcely comprehend even the political methods of the huge tortoise called Russia, which decides upon a thing, and calmly waits one hundred years to bring about either it or the chance that permits it. But women have this subtlest form of tact. When they are most eager, they can hold back and parley and deny. Nature wills that it should be so in order that the directness, the explosive force, and the impatience of the passions of men may be balanced, else only God knows what mistakes and violence and misery might mark the relations of the sexes. When a thing did not matter — as whether Miss Lamont should have ice-cream now, or wait until it was easier to get — she could be as impatient and eager as a fly. But when she was stirred to her soul's depths, and made ten times more eager, she could wait a year, as if she forgot that we live but seventy years, and of them twenty at one end have no real interest, while fifteen at the other are mainly good for reminiscence.

Under great urging, she sang at the piano, but she reasoned that her singing voice was nothing like her speaking voice. And she was right.

At last, when the company was breaking up, and hats and canes, capes and bonnets, were demanded, Beekman searched the studio and its anterooms for the proudest, most beautiful, purest face they held, for the most girlish figure, made imposing by the utmost dignity of pose. He found the possessor of these charms standing apart from the others.



"'I AM TO KNOW YOU BETTER THAN I KNOW, OR EVER KNEW, MAN OR WOMAN ON EARTH'"

"Miss Lamont," said he, "I am obliged to say 'good-night.' I may not ask you what my voice said to you when our two lives touched one another for the first time."

"Oh, I —" she stammered. Perhaps she was about to deny that something within her had translated his voice into a speech of soul to soul too subtle to be put into language. That would have been a lie, yet one of a sort that is sanctioned in maidens by centuries of usage — for in more than one respect is there one standard of morals for men, and a different standard for women.

"I would not presume to ask you that," he went on, purposely interrupting her; "but I may tell you that your voice announced to me that I am to know you better than I know, or ever knew, man or woman on earth."

"I hope we shall all know you as well," she answered. "We are like so many brothers and sisters here. I am very glad you have joined our club, Mr. Beekman."

"I wonder why Mr. Paton does not share your kind feeling — the gentleman who read the novelette?"

"Mr. Beekman, you are uncanny," Miss Lamont replied.

"Oh, no; merely observant," said he. "I bear him no ill-will. Life would be no good if we stored it full of resentments and fits of temper. I only wonder, because such opposition, if one's opponent is clean and honest, is a rebuke for some fault, and I want to know all my faults, else how can I correct them? Miss Lamont, you and I will always say '*au revoir*' — never 'good-bye.'"

When he had gone, Miss Lamont made her way out by a devious course, to avoid her cousin. She felt that she knew why he had voted against Mr. Beekman, and that he might even blame her for attracting the peculiar and especial interest of the newcomer — innocent as she felt herself to be.

V.

BEAUTIFUL, RICH, LOVABLE — YET ALMOST ALONE

"Is she not passing fair?" — *Two Gentlemen of Verona.*

A FORTNIGHT after the meeting of the Beaux Arts Club, we are minded to follow Miss Lamont to her home in Powellton, some distance inland from the Hudson River, in the region of which Newburg and Poughkeepsie may be said to play the parts of two capitals. The estate and great fortune of Colonel Lamont had been begging for an heir until, at last, Laura was discovered. She was a niece of the old gentleman, yet a very poor — indeed, a homeless — girl, whose only companion, her mother, had been removed to an institution for the treatment of a malady of the brain at the time when the girl's kindly fates brought her to the ownership of her uncle's great fortune and his stately colonial mansion — the homestead of the Lamonts. Now, we find her more than two years older, ending a summer's rest after a lively season divided between the cares she had imposed upon herself in the near-by village, which was a part of her estate, and the strain of many experiences in — I had almost said fashionable life, but social pleasure is the truer term.

Rich as she was, and beautiful in the extreme, she had not the entrée to fashionable society, and her pleasures and dissipations were enjoyed with the well-to-do circle of refined men and women of the Beaux Arts set and its connections. It would be untrue to say that she was obliged to be content with this — the most intellectual and satisfying coterie in New York. Rather was it true that she hungered for admittance to the innermost circle of the professional fashionables, the exclusive "Four Hundred." With sense enough to foresee that they might disappoint her, and that she might eagerly return to her earlier friends, never again to be drawn away from them, she, none the less, desired the fullest experience, to make the highest flight, to know the utmost joy of social success and, after that, to settle where she chose. To declare this is but to say that she was a woman, heart-free, idle or busy as she chose, and with sufficient worldly means to pay her footing anywhere.

This book is the story of her ambition in this wise, and of her dumb, unconscious gravitation toward matrimony. There are whole chapters in which the reader may seem to lose touch with each of these impulses, and in which Laura Lamont was truly forgetful of both, yet the forces that were weaving her destiny worked on and on, and never paused.

Though Laura's mother was again with her, the beautiful heiress was little better than alone in the world, in so far as any ability to command motherly, or any other form of intimate, counsel and guidance was concerned. Her father for many years had kept apart from his wife and daughter, and thus had rid himself of the last impulse toward unselfishness,—the sole elevating force left to what are called "men of the world." Thenceforth he wallowed in a mainly animal existence. On hearing of Laura's good fortune, he wrote from Europe to his New York lawyers, to notify his wife that he wished her to consider him dead. Now that remittances of money, the only form his communications had taken in years, were no longer needed by the two women, he said he should feel no further concern about them. Since that time it had been to them as if he was dead. They never heard of or from him again.

Alone she guided the heavily freighted bark of her life's duties and responsibilities, and yet with a confident hand she sailed it over deep waters, and even through uncharted straits. Alone she presided over the house which she had transformed into one of the most luxurious and splendid of all the country-seats in the valley of the Hudson. She had beautified it in obedience to a principle which ruled her life, for the pleasure and profit of the public. It was a notable museum of the choice ceramics of Europe and Asia and of the most artistic furniture of France and England of from a century to three centuries ago. Very few other homes in America contained such treasures in tapestry, hangings, and rugs, or a greater or finer display of old clocks, bronzes, and ancient fashionings in pewter and brass. Her silver and Sheffield plate — with which a large van might have been filled — was mainly stored in New York, only a small amount of it being kept at the manor-house, under lock and key except upon the most extraordinary occasions. Her servants were instructed in the nature and history of the beautiful appointments of the drawing-room, dining-room, library, hall, and reception-room, and these men and women understood that to the very humblest who came must be extended the utmost courtesy, as if they were the owners of her wealth, and she was but its custodian. During half of each day the ground floor of the mansion was at the command of whosoever cared to inspect it. And during the same hours the ornamental grounds around the mansion were the rendezvous of such of her tenants as cared to bring their sewing, their books, or their children under the shade of her trees, or upon the heavy carpeting of her lawn.

"It was long our good fortune," she used to say, speaking for her mother as well as herself, "to live in Southern France and in Northern Italy, surrounded by many of the noblest, most admirable of the mansions of the wealthy. Nearly all were more or less open for our pleasure and profit, either as friends of the proprietors or as mere members of the public. When cruel poverty came to be our lot I, for the first time, correctly valued what I had before that so blindly enjoyed, and I learned what the rich owe to the poor — what they can and should do to justify their possession of wealth. I am aware that this is a socialistic view of the case, but I knew nothing of what others held when, by simple logic, I came to this opinion. And to-day I claim discipleship with no philosopher, and relationship with no party in holding — as I do — that if the rich desire, even out of pure selfishness, merely to serve their own interests, they must at the same time serve the masses by sharing with them not only their wealth, but their time and their wisdom, in a brotherly effort to improve their condition. This they must do if they would remain safe, in comfort and in command."

"The Clock House" is the simple and unpoetic name by which Miss Lamont's home is generally known, and it is so called because, in a tower high above the roof, there is a large round clock with a ground glass dial that is like a dead staring face by day, and a brilliant little moon by night. It had been as purely colonial in most of its fittings as in its architectural designing, but Miss

Lamont, eager to see Italy once again, had gone there eighteen months before, and from that country and England had brought back as much of art and ornament as could be utilised in enriching the principal rooms in the great old mansion. She threw out nothing that was rare and beautiful of the old family belongings, but so altered even the ceilings, doors, and windows of the rooms, that it was as if the old jewels had gone into new caskets. A glance at the drawing-room will provide for the reader at least a suggestion of the appointments and ornamentation of all that lower part of the house, which was gradually becoming one of the "sights" of tourists and places of rendezvous of those who love the imperishable beauty of the best art of distant lands and centuries.

The word "baronial" presents, at a stroke, an idea of the size and loftiness of the drawing-room. Its long doorlike windows in their heavily carved frames were thrown open upon the broad gravelled drive which separated the mansion from the spacious lawn that reached far away to the wall beside the Fishkill road. The rich carved oak of the walls was broken in a broad central space between a low wainscot and a narrow frieze. This space wore a covering of the hue of old gold patterned with large but faint flowers and leaves, making a showy background for the group of old engravings in ebon frames, and the family portraits in oil, whose gold frames time was turning copper-hued. All the furniture was lustrous mahogany of the graceful fashioning of Chippendale, except a central table of black oak, whose elaborate carving betrayed its false pretence of age; a Sheraton table slightly inlaid, a kidney table, and a half-table against one wall — all of eighteenth century mahogany. These were littered with bric-à-brac: powder-blue porcelain from Nankin, its clumsy reflections from Delft, the delicate picture-china of Saxony, and dainty clocks, statuettes, candlesticks, and caskets of French gilt, of Oriental and French bronze, and of faintly blushing Sheffield plate. Against one wall an ornate Dutch stove of pictured porcelain carried a precious load of willow china, old Worcester and old Staffordshire. These treasures were in large and uncommon forms, and held palms and ferns upon which the sunblaze of out-of-doors fell softened through yellow sash curtains of China silk.

Each door was a massive picture-design in basso-relievo, and each one swung in a deep recess whose sides and top were rich with massive carving. Nowhere did the ceiling meet its sustaining walls at right angles, for the walls curved and merged into the ceiling. The upholstering of the furniture was " old gold " in tone, and this same colour-note, caught from the broad panel along the walls, was carried to its termination by the heavy Asiatic rugs upon the polished floor. The room was at once rich and quiet — triumphant and sober — echoing, it was thought, the reflected refinement of a strong yet gentle woman — of Miss Lamont herself, in fact. This fancy enhanced every one's appreciation of its beauties, yet not all the credit was Miss Laura's. Her main contribution had been the frame — the box, as it were, but fully half the ornaments had been selected and placed there by Editha Lamont, the last mistress of the mansion, and these had been gathered and stored away in boxes and cases by other Lamonts a century before even Editha was born.

The season at which we are visiting this home was that when the marigolds, geraniums, chrysanthemums, and roses, in the noble garden, still bravely exhibited rich blossoms, though the first chilled winds were biting some of their leaves.

A visitor is taking leave of her in the library — a young, ravenlike man, all in black, and buttoned to the chin — a parson, obviously, but with the bright eyes and nervous quickness of a man on 'Change.

"We'll show them what a dominie and a woman can do," he is saying, with boyish enthusiasm. "It's cassock and petticoat against the world, but, as the wicked say, 'it's safe to back the drapery against all the odds.'"

A singular reverend, this York Stone; perhaps a startling one, but only to those who did not know him. Laura might easily have first met him at a baseball game or a football match, but as a matter of fact, it was in a humble cottage, out toward where she herself had lived in poverty not long before, that she first crossed his path in the very early days of her sudden prosperity. The smooth-faced man in black — only twenty-eight, and looking five years younger — had no sooner come into the cottage where she had stopped, than he called her out upon the road.

"You are the rich Miss Lamont?" he inquired.

"I am Miss Lamont."

"Offering money to these poor people?"

"I wish to help them," she replied.

"Well, helping them is one thing, but giving them money is not helping them. Giving money to the poor without exacting something in return, or without seeing to it that their self-respect and pride are not impaired, is merely demoralising them — pauperising them. I beg you not to do that. You all mean kindly, you people with money and nothing to do, but you poison your victims, you widen the breach between the brothers Rich and Poor, already being pushed apart by injustice, greed, and lack of sympathy, though God had joined them, and meant them to work together. Don't begin it here, Miss Lamont. Let me come to you when I need a little change for medicines or delicacies for the sick, or work for the unemployed — then no mischief will be done."

The young man's earnestness and the kindly tone of his voice softened his plain speech, and carried conviction with them, as well.

"I only wished to be useful," Laura ventured, half apologising for the impulse, as if she feared that also might be declared mischievous.

"Useful? Good gracious!" exclaimed the boyish-looking but masterful parson, "there are more ways to be useful than you have time or money for. My name is Stone — York Stone — of the Episcopal church at Wapata. By pure assurance I have reached over into this hamlet, as you see. Let me call on you, and if you wish to do good, let us work together."

This occurred two years earlier than when this story begins, and already he was paying his fiftieth visit. He and Miss Lamont had been alternately laughing light-heartedly and sagely studying note-books and sheets of names and figures, as if they formed a committee of the local board of supervisors, preparing a report of the county revenue.

When he had taken his leave, Laura went to the drawing-room with her mother — who had been present during the parson's visit — and there they ordered their afternoon tea. Mrs. Lamont, as she had come to be called since her daughter's change of name. looked a splendid woman; almost a grand dame. She retained the good figure which had been part of her earlier beauty, and still carried it as proudly as ever. Her face had great distinction, being that of a finely born and bred woman of clear intellect, strong will, and little cause or inclination toward self-disparagement. As she sat, at this time, looking at her daughter, you would have said that the beautiful young girl was fortunate to retain this strong companionship and guidance. But, alas! the mother's appearance was only a seeming. She suggested what I have read of the exquisite body of a maiden which was found not long ago in a buried city of Italy, encased in lava. Its discoverers had scarcely time to exclaim at its beauty, when the body resolved into dust, and there remained only the mould which it had made in the molten stone. So, in Mrs. Lamont's case, only the form remained — the temple from which the god had been taken. Mother and daughter had exchanged places. Laura was now the guardian, and Mrs. Lamont the child.

VI.

THE MAID AND HER MONEY

> **"A mother is a mother still,**
> **The holiest thing alive." — *Coleridge.***

"OH-H-H!" Laura exclaimed in such a sigh as we utter when we would attract attention without demanding it. She had been idly moving some ornaments about on the mantelpiece, but now she rested an elbow there, and laid her head within the bend of her arm.

"Oh-h-h!" again, and this time Mrs. Lamont looked up and saw an expression of perplexity and impatience upon her daughter's face.

"What is it, Laura?"

"I'm wishing for something I cannot buy."

"You mean some *one* — not something. I know, I know, dearie; is it Mr. Stone, or do you mean Lawyer Borrowes?"

"Not either, mother, yet it is some one, as you think."

"You mean your cousin Archie," Mrs. Lamont persisted, adding with a pitiful pretence of mental alertness: "Oh, I know more than you have believed — since I recovered. Cousin Archie, eh? Only to speak truly, dear, I had been thinking Mr. Stone was crowding your cousin out. Eh? Be frank with mother. Hasn't Mr. Stone been in our minds a great deal lately?"

"Oh, you dear, dear mother," Laura said, tripping across the room to fall upon her knees beside her mother's chair and throw an arm about her neck and kiss her. "Don't go and get ideas out of your knitting, or the wall-paper, or the sunbeams. Mr. Stone's nice and kind, old Lawyer Borrowes is nice, and Cousin Archie is nice. Everybody and everything, everywhere, is nice — to me — and I am simply wishing for the moon, like a little child."

"Mr. Borrowes is married," said the inapt elder. "Oh, I'm not to be hoodwinked so easily, Laura."

"No, she sha'n't be hoodwinked — the dear, dear, little mudder. And Mr. Borrowes is married — forty years deep in marriage — with five formidable proofs of it in his quiverful of fat boys and fatter girls. As for Cousin Archie, it is not he who fills my thoughts, though I do wonder about him — why he does not come to visit us. The ladies of our club — the Beaux Arts, you know — "

"Made mischief, did they, dearie?"

"No, why should you think that?" Laura went on. "They said when the situation was new, last autumn, that Cousin Archie was — was greatly interested in me — that he thought I was — that is, he considered himself very fortunate — and all that, you know."

"I understand perfectly, the dear boy," said Mrs. Lamont.

"Only," Laura continued, "Mrs. Kellogg, who knows him very well, said he was too proud even to have it thought he would marry a woman with money — I'm sure I don't know why people always bring in marriage — and that he is a 'crank' about believing that women should be useful, and earn their own way like men, unless they have young children."

"Most women earn all they get," said Mrs. Lamont, with a flash of something like her brain returning.

"And Mrs. Russell," Laura continued; "Mrs. Russell, who is sensibler than all the women I have ever met — I mean except my dearest, dearest mother — she says Cousin Archie only talks such things by way of practice, for writing them in his novels, and that — I hope she's wrong, though — he is what she calls a man in 'club pickle.' She calls clubs the tombs of morally dead men — it's perfectly awful to hear the way she goes on about them, and she's generally so liberal, you know. She says Cousin Archie has gone into his vault, and is gradually shutting the door on the many fine traits for which he was once so beloved. We won't believe that, shall we, mother?"

"Do have a formal church marriage, dear," said Mrs. Lamont.

"Now, mother, don't begin on that."

"As formal a ceremony, in as big a church as possible; if not Trinity, then nothing less than St. Thomas's. Oh, I know; you are set on a private house ceremony. It's your one violent opposition to my wishes — and I think it's so unkind of you."

"Dearest mother, I am not at all opposed to you. I only said not to talk of it because you so often do discuss it, though I tell you I do not even wish to think of marriage. You are for ever having me all but married, mother, to this man and that man and the other, but, truly, since it seems I must keep on telling you, nothing that I can think of is further from me. I want to enjoy the blessings I have, and they are too great and too rich for me to want for others. I want to realise the opportunities of my youth and wealth — the pleasures, yes, why not the pleasures as well as the chances God has given me to do good?"

"I know, Laura; I know. I was the same as you — denying it — always denying it, even to myself. But do have it all — organist, choir, maids, trainbearers, grooms, house reception, honeymoon journey — every bit of a formal marriage. I cannot think why you oppose me so."

"Mother, please don't;" for the feeble lady was beginning to weep silently. "Please, please don't."

"Marrying privately is putting a slight on a sacrament. I was married privately — in a hotel, and — in a year I was an old shoe; in two years, cast off —"

The first soft rain of grief was now swollen into a strong gust of hysterical crying.

"Oh, mother, why will you work yourself up so, and bring back those cruel memories? Feel me, mother, with my arms around you. See this great house and all this comfort — it and I, and all we both hold, are yours, dearest. Do let the dead past lie buried."

Thus closing another of her frequently sad interviews with her infirm mother, Laura Lamont went back to the books and papers which had engaged her and the clergyman a half-hour earlier. And what had these two partners accomplished? More, upon the surface, than the reader would have believed was possible; more yet, beneath the surface, in the hearts and minds of the poor.

To work upon, they had found a slovenly village of workmen's cottages, with a shabby yard in front of each, and a shabbier yard behind. A few small, starved-looking shops, and a low grade tavern — but no school or church edifice — completed the village. What Powellton lacked was to be found in Wapata, with which a slowly lengthening line of houses was forming a Siamese joint. The poison of the drinking saloon was at work all through the village, and had rendered it almost wholly disreputable. To-day, Powellton wore a neat and flourishing air. The worst weeds among the inhabitants had been rooted out, new houses had been constructed, and the old ones had been overhauled and renewed. In an attractive park-like square stood a large town hall, containing a lecture-room, library, lodge-room, gymnasium, and Baptist, Roman Catholic, and Episcopal chapels, each church having a large room of its own for its uses. All the yards were now tidy, shady and blooming gardens, new shops were added to the settlement, and new cottages were building. All this had been effected with Miss Lamont's money, and the practical sympathetic planning of the Rev. York Stone.

Of all that had marred the village when its new owner came into her property, only the now languishing tavern remained. Every lease of a cottage carried with it a lease of a portion of a large commercial garden, in which practical gardeners taught the people how to raise vegetables and flowers. This was but one way by which the women earned money while the men worked in the near-by quarry and carpet factory, and almost every family was prosperous.

Miss Lamont expended one-tenth of her income in aiding the village folk and improving their surroundings. To every one she gave practical assistance toward self-help; to no one did she misspend a dollar in those forms of charity which tend to weaken the pride and independence of the recipients.

From their first meeting, a mutual respect, quickly developing into intimacy, had sprung up between the wealthy maiden and the clergyman. To this time their relations had never grown beyond a mere intimacy of their intellects. Yet she was impressionable, she was inclined to salve the wound dealt her by the widening breach between her and her cousin; she admired York Stone, and leaned upon his counsel and support in her philanthropic work.

Clearly it might have been advantageous to him to gradually break down the barrier of reserve which repulsed the warmer inclination of her nature. He made no such effort. When he was not her agent, he was her pastor. He had never yet faltered in moving from one relation to the other.

She often sighed when he left her house after a business interview. She was but barely conscious that she did so, and he was as blind of heart as is a mole of seeing.

VII.

THE NEW GOSPEL OF SMOKE

"'. . . still, Slavery,' said I, 'still thou art a bitter draught.'" — *Sentimental Journey.*

ARCHIBALD PATON, novelist, dandy, "without fear and without reproach" (on the score of clothes), and known in the Beaux Arts Club of rich New York Bohemians as "the Brute," because he was the only bachelor among them, was scudding along toward Laura as fast as a Pullman coach in an express train could send him. Beside him sat Mrs. Percy Russell, "sensibler," as we have heard, than most women. She was the wife of "the Babe" of the Club, who, in the work-a-day world, was known as a celebrated architect. She was then a woman at woman's best age — thirty-three — of splendid physique; tall, large, matronly, comfortable-looking, and comforting to look at. She was dressed all in blue, from the top of the tallest plume in her large hat down to the hem of her tailor-made blue cloth suit; all in blue except her rosy cheeks, rosier lips, and the kindly brown eyes under the black eyebrows that matched her hair. In spite of her stature and build, she was feminine to the tips of her fingers and toes. A quality which is only suggested by the word "nice" was her most marked attribute. She was "nice" in the fineness and grace of every movement of her limbs. She was "nice" in the choice and fit and wrinkleless keeping of her clothes. She was "nice" in the expression of her wholesome face, in her choice of language, in her thoughts, her impulses.

"Archie," said she to her companion, with his upturned mustachios, his pince-nez, gold-rimmed glasses, his fashion-plate Tweed suit, new born of a bandbox, his irreproachable and uncommonly evident linen, and his neatly gloved hands; "Archie, I thought I should have trouble in getting you to come with me."

"I was going, anyway, before you sent me word."

"Better yet. Not flattering to me, exactly, but very much so to your sweet cousin. She will be delighted to see you — I'm sure of it, though I have not heard from her."

"Yes, I fancy she will," said Paton, stifling a groan.

"Well, I declare! What a delightfully calm confidence you have in your own magnetic quality. The repose of an Alp, as the morning mist disperses and it greets the sun, partakes of stage-nervousness compared to your perfect poise."

"I meant nothing more than that my lady friends insist that Laura likes me — likes me more than I wish was the case — more than I think I should be held responsible for, though at first I was a little to blame, perhaps."

"Do you know," Mrs. Russell inquired, "that she worshipped you — whether she does now or not — and that out of gratitude for your aid when she was in great trouble, she meant to give her wealth to you? The lawyers, whom she consulted on other matters, forced her to change her plan."

"I know it," Paton said; "was there ever a project so foolish?"

"Archie, there was a time, not long ago, when you could have married that dear girl."

"Do you regard it as impossible now?"

"My patience, but men are frank!"

"Some men are — to some women."

"Why haven't you proposed to her? You have seen how she felt toward you, and you cannot say you ever saw a lovelier or more lovable woman."

"I despise poor men who marry rich women, for one thing," Archibald answered.

"Archie Paton, you honour me with frankness one minute, and disparage me with nonsense the next. I heard that you said to others that you would propose to Laura but for her wealth, but you do not mean that. Manly men take no account of a sweetheart's worldly condition. If she is poor they endeavour to make her rich. If she is rich they take her, and leave her money alone. I did not think you would give me such a reason."

"Well, leaving that aside, I was engaged to a girl when I met her — or as good as engaged — and — and — "

"Are you going to pretend to me that your heart was torn in that affair?"

"No," Archie argued, "but think how it would look to go from one girl straight to another, with the mitten of rejection still in one's hand."

"How long have you been so sensitive to the idle opinion of outsiders that it could turn you from a good undertaking?"

"Oh, you may doubt whatever I tell you, of course," Archie replied. "I really was — and am — greatly taken with Laura, but — now, you will doubt this along with the rest — still I tell you that I did not think it would be fair to her to court her. I was thirty and experienced, and she eighteen and simple. I should have felt it was like sharp practice to take advantage of such an opportunity. I made up my mind to keep away from her as much as possible, not alone for reasons of honour, either, but for the well-being of both of us. There, now, that's honest; and it's explanation enough."

"I am glad that in the number of your reasons you include one in which she is considered. The others concerned only yourself."

"Don't you think, yourself, that she ought to see life and men of many sorts?" he asked; "and make her own choice — not of a husband, merely, but of a path in life?"

"What mischoice of a path do you think Laura could possibly make which need give a lover reason to delay his suit?"

"All women are responsible for the influence they exert in their time, and rich women have an added obligation," Archie ventured. "Laura might turn out to be one of many kinds of women that a man of intelligence does not admire, — a fad mare, for instance: with saddle-bags full of Browning this year, packed with 'slumming' next year, or laden, the year after, with ritualistic embroidery, or palmistry, or theosophy. Or she might prove utterly frivolous — a society belle."

"Do you not know how wholly different are Laura's pursuits from any of the things you have suggested — but, no, you do not, will not know. You will not come out of yourself long enough to see what she is doing — she, a priceless gift, that would be yours for the mere asking. But let us drop the subject. I am never more impressed," Mrs. Russell continued, a quirk at her mouth's corners and a twinkle in her eyes, "than when a clubman rails at women for taking up with trifling things. How much time do clubbable men give up to the cultivation of the finer and unselfish sides of their natures which such women shut out of their lives?"

"I, who do a day's work six days a week, and three hundred and thirteen days a year," Archie replied, "am not to be called on to defend club-life, but, for myself and all men like me, I can say that we yield to idle pleasures only the time in which we are resting from labour. We do not make a business of either pleasure or loafing, and if a young girl like my cousin, with youth and beauty, and a world full of action before her, continues as she has started, to frivol her life away in chatter and calls and teas, dinners and dances — and slavery to dress, then I shall be glad I stood aside, for I want no such companion as that."

"Archie Paton, can I talk to you frankly?" Mrs. Russell inquired, with impressive gravity; "just as I have always done?"

"Helen, I'm wedged in here, with no chance of escape except by the window. I can only remind you that he who has the strength of a giant should use it like a child."

"But listen, Archie. This is something that has been troubling other old friends; but, no, I will speak only for myself. Correct me if I am wrong. You proposed to that Southern girl. You suspected she cared more for the property she hoped you would fall heir to than for yourself. You told me so, you know. You did not demand uncommon wisdom, in her case; you did not wait to study her tendencies. Without any study, you must have known she was vain and frivolous — yet you proposed to her. Why? You risked your future happiness in that case, Archie, because your conscience told you that you were drifting away from — from many things which, from your mother's knee, you had learned to respect. Oh, I only mean that you were becoming wholly a man's man, a club-man, a confirmed bachelor — with all which the term implies. I have seen it growing, fixing itself upon you. I noticed it when you began to find fault with one woman after another, whose society you used to like; and, now, you find little to praise in any woman, or any things women do, or any ways they have. All drawing-rooms bore you now, Archie. Your club sees more and more of you; the homes of your married friends see less and less. You are shutting up one whole great side of your nature, and expanding the other — not the masculine side, but — do you mind my saying what I think?"

"Would you ask a frog, when you had half his skin off, whether he minded the process?" Archibald asked.

"It is the selfish side you are expanding. You are restive under all discipline, and you shy at the least restraint. The club, where you can smoke at all times, even in the middle of a meal, the liberty to choose precisely the diversions and companions that suit each mood, the freedom at all hours and of speech and companions — "

"Come, come! Helen, I say!"

"Yes, Archie; don't think I could go too far. I don't insinuate that you are not still, and will not always be, a man above the reproach of men, above rudeness in any form. But you are cultivating yourself more and more, to the exclusion of all that does not concern your whims and comfort. And now I come to the point: you proposed haphazard to that girl from the South because you felt all this, because your conscience reproached you, because you feared that if you did not use that girl to bring you back to your complete broad duty to society, you soon would lose the courage to make such an effort."

A pause. A silence elastic — stretching to the breaking point.

"Isn't it so, Archie?"

A faint smile of amusement creeps over Paton's face, but there comes no answer in words.

"She threw you over — bless her for that — and then came your cousin Laura. Had she come before the Southern girl you would be married to-day, and on the way to being the best of husbands, and a far happier man than you are. But the other one came, with characteristic vanity and folly, at the wrong time — and threw you over. And you sank back in the leather-cushioned chairs of the Madison Club, from which you no longer care to struggle to free yourself."

"Is it not so, Archie?" (Another long pause.) "Archie!"

"If you don't mind, Helen," said he, "I'll go forward and smoke a cigar."

"Leaving me to think I should not have spoken so frankly to you, relying on our old friendship and my regard for you?"

"No," he rejoined, "I am not going to be so rude as not to answer you. Nor will I let you think you may not always talk to me as you — wrongly or rightly — think I deserve. But this is a very serious indictment, and I must take counsel how to reply. I'll get it out of a cigar. In the meantime, Helen, you are one woman with whom I never will find fault — with whom no self-respecting and just man ever could find fault. Tell Percy I said so, if he ever dares to grumble at you. As to your dissection of my insignificant character, pray observe that I am but a creature of the times. I read very bad things of the times in the reports of the Sunday sermons. Sometimes I hear that this is the age of enlightened sensuality, then that it is the age of materialism and godless pleasure, again that it is the epoch of dollar-worship, and — still farther — that it is the era of the individual, in which every man aims at success for himself, regardless of the rights of others. Oh, I, too, could preach, you see, but I will rest content with saying that whatever the times may be, I am not responsible for being their child."

"Since you know the truth, Archie, you must know that you cannot shift your responsibility. To pretend ignorance of that would be to claim idiocy as one's portion."

"Thanks, Helen. I do know one thing. You would learn it, too, if you would smoke, as I am going to do. It is that nothing is of very great consequence. Everything is sure to end in smoke —or less. Cigars, men, the dear ladies, philosophy, morals, cares, responsibilities — all resolve themselves sooner or later into smoke."

VIII.

HER VIEWS UPON SOCIETY

"And the greatest of these is woman." — *Wiseacre.*

"MURDER! Murder! All about the horrurble murder!" a newsboy shouted, as he dashed toward Archie, while he and Mrs. Russell were looking for Miss Lamont's carriage at the Fishkill Station. "*Evening Star!* All 'bout the terrible murder!" another boy shouted, as he flung himself between Archie and the carriage step, as if to prevent the inconceivable error of a man's existence without the harrowing particulars of the only sensation since breakfast. "Hi, mister! Paper! All about the murder!" a third ragamuffin kept calling as he ran beside the moving coupé.

"What is it all — do you know?" Mrs. Russell asked.

"There has been a suicide by a young girl. I read it in the New York papers," Archie answered. "There's no suspicion of murder, as the newspaper people well know, but in discrediting themselves and making their profession ridiculous, a certain class of papers never misses the minutest chance at perversion, distortion, or even naked lying."

As the carriage rolled into usually quiet little Powellton, the place was seen to be very much disturbed. The principal corners held knots of idlers, and before the hotel a crowd of men lounged, with half-expectant, half-wearied faces, as if they were tired of waiting for a new wrench of their tautened nerves, and had not quite given up hoping for it. Two or three loafer-looking men of the roughest city type, in a knot by themselves, Paton at once distinguished as detectives. A group of well-dressed, almost boyish fellows, nervous in the extreme, some of whom darted out to peer in the carriage door at our travellers, he knew to be New York reporters.

"Murder! Extry *Standard!*" shouted a printer's devil from the village newspaper office, with his face against the carriage pane.

"Riches, women, and babies — 'you can't print too much about those three topics,' a great editor once said to me — and the greatest of these is woman," Archie remarked. "Woman murdering, or woman murdered — no matter which; but woman always."

With an impatience which was at odds with her formal and elaborate evening dress, Laura awaited the coming of her cousin and her friend. A year of the activities of serious womanhood had greatly changed her. No longer chubby-cheeked and limpid-eyed, with ungoverned girlish lower lip, she was now new-modelled by the grace of confident self-possession and radiant with intelligence — that spark which alone gives quality to beauty. She was nothing hardened by occasional ventures into fashionable society, because that of her circle had not been of the most fashionable, therefore most trying order. She had only entered the alcove of the throne-room, where the brilliance of the court is merely reflected. Therefore she had simply been matured and polished, instead of becoming petrified or brass-plated. A prettier girl than ever, now; not tall enough to suit those who could judge her coldly, but to the greater number, who loved and admired her, an exquisite blond beauty. Her thoughtful, sympathetic eyes beneath her fine forehead, and above her ripe mouth of goodly size, were the external tokens of her breadth of judgment, her kindliness and her capacity for everything worth any one's pride, loving included. Her habitual expression — as important a feature as any that is modelled in flesh — was alert, bright, sanguine, kindly. Her taste, as seen in her dress and home surroundings, was unfalteringly simple and restrained. Above all else was her refinement. She was like a lily even among the gentlest women — delicate, exquisite, chaste — all in the simplest, purest way.

We have seen that her house was a casket fit for the jewel. If we looked at the jewel itself we saw that its more immediate setting was equally tasteful. We could not help noting the perfect fit of whatever she wore, which gave her the triumphant appearance of having been melted and poured into her frocks. At the moment of which I write, the subtle revelations of dress — those betrayals for which the Orientals condemn us as immodest and barbaric — showed that her form was maidenly rather than ripe and buxom, though, truly, it was buxom in the original sense of the word; lithe, flexible, and well fitted for quick, graceful motion.

"Oh, Cousin Archibald! I am so glad to see you."

She threw the lovely burden of herself toward him almost as if it was for him to take up within his arms.

"How d' do?" he asked, with the tone that an iceberg would use could it speak. A stiff arm in readiness for a stiff shake went with the tone, and one cooled while the other restrained the ardent and demonstrative maiden.

"Hope you're well," added the talking berg.

"I am so glad you have come. But it was Mrs. Russell who brought you, wasn't it?"

"In a way."

"Oh, Mrs. Russell! How glad I am to see you!"

"How sweet of you to say so, Laura."

The ramrod-like butler in livery felt scandalised by the disparagement of the footman's services as doorkeeper, and by a mistress who ran out in the garden to greet her friends, instead of sitting within and appearing surprised when they came — à la Anglais. He felt that if his mistress should now send off the footman, and insist upon bringing in the bags and wraps from the carriage his resignation must follow in defence of his self-respect. But much as he felt, he still remained a human ramrod, and the footman brought in the bags and wraps without interference.

Renewed salutations and volleys of questions, flying to and from each of the women, consumed the time the servants took for the belongings of the visitors to be unpacked and distributed — night-dresses on the beds and slippers beside them, brushes, combs, and toilet things in their places, clothing laid out, and the final jug of hot water in each room. Then all went up-stairs, and Laura pointed out each room, following Mrs. Russell into hers to give her "a private real hug" and to whisper a little over Archie's coldness.

"Don't like him too much, dear," Mrs. Russell whispered, in the quick finish of that hug.

"Why? Don't you admire Archie as much as ever?"

"Yes, yes, of course," said Mrs. Russell, "but don't like any man too much — not even a paragon like Archie — until you are sure he will return the feeling. Love is like that other mystic force, which requires a positive and negative pole and an unbroken circuit between them before it has much usefulness or value."

"I thought you meant that," said Laura, with a gayer tone, "but I am really in no need of a warning. I'm very grateful to him, and very proud of him, and I like him — very much, as you know. But I don't — a year ago, you see, I was in much more danger; that is, I mean, it was different, for then, if he hadn't avoided me all the time, I might have easily — that is I almost wanted — you understand."

"It was natural, too," said her companion of the mind-reading sex; "it was so fresh, then, and all so romantic, wasn't it?"

"Yes, you know," from Laura, "I really thought it was my duty, and how could any one help admiring him?"

Helen Russell's face cleared, and a little sigh of relief escaped her. She wrongly fancied that she knew how each of these cousins felt toward the other. Thought she: "Laura is all gunpowder, waiting for a spark from Archie, but he has left his flint and steel at the club — in the same locker with his heart, I fear."

The butler came to the drawing-room door to announce the meal, and then Laura asked Archie to escort Mrs. Russell, saying that she would take in her mother. They found the splendid oak-wainscoted dining-room apparently untouched, yet strangely altered — in this, that it glowed with light which proceeded from no lamp or jet or carbon loop which eye could discover. Laura had caused manifold electric lights to be hidden behind the top of the oaken panelling, and, above that, she had covered the wall, to the ceiling, with gold foil. Upon this the light of the hidden lamps fell, to be thrown all over the room, as sunlight permeates the outer atmosphere. The four great portraits of dead-and-gone Lamonts stood out clearly upon the light-absorbing walls of deeply carved dark oak, and, in the middle of the great room, the table shone in a red glow of the soft light of electric candles canopied by red silk shades. In the centre of the table was a mound of choice flowers, and, beyond the edge of this gorgeous bed, wayward creepers of smilax reached almost out to each plate. Spoons of great size and quaint shapes from Holland, Russia, France, and England were thrown here and there upon the damask cloth. The cellars and pepper-casters were quite as curious, and all the glass was the finest, sparkling like colossal gems. Every course was served by the liveried men-servants from old English silver upon dainty modern china.

At the first glance around the room and over the table, Archie frowned an unspoken criticism of his cousin's extravagance. Then his artistic instinct awoke and bade him make note of all that he saw, for the arrangement was faultless. The soft, modulated light around the walls, whose deep carvings shed black shadows, the table standing forth in its own rosy glow, the gleam of silver and glint of crystal, and the blaze of soft colour, — these combined the splendour and balance of poetry.

"Well," said Paton, always keenly sensitive to such effects, and feeling sufficiently at home to refer to them, "I must say you have renewed the youth of this ancient dining-hall, and without any violence or profanation."

"And the table, dear. Archie can only see the room," said Mrs. Russell, "but the table is too lovely for English words."

"The wines are those of which you are fondest, Cousin Archie," Laura broke in. "This is the sherry your uncle had from his grandfather. You are to have the Pontet-Canet you liked so much when you were here last time, — ages ago, I am sorry to say, — and after that the '89 champagne."

"You are very kind," Archie replied. "If good wines need no bush, perhaps it is as fair to say that such a bush as this needs no wine at all. But I will accept it on the ground which I once heard an English labourer take about his beer. Said he: 'A labouring man has a right to his beer — if he can get it.' You have given thought to table decoration, Cousin Laura; what place in the social order does dining occupy, do you think?"

"Absolutely the first, I should say," Laura replied, seeing that he meant to quiz her, and appearing to humour him; "that is, the ladies I know who go in for entertaining all rank it first. I remember that Mrs. Egerton-Wood once said that 'in the family circle novel dishes, well cooked and appetisingly served, bring and keep the men at home. In formal life,' she said, 'the character of your dinners stamps your standing in society.' And Mrs. Mowbray-Stanton, who is very sarcastic, once said to me, 'By giving elaborate dinners any one may get into the best circles, and, if you study men's tastes at table, you may command any man in fashionable life to your house, or any number of men.'"

"You are going to be a mistress of the art?"

"Oh, I am not expressing my views; I was quoting others," Laura answered. "For myself, I'm afraid I most enjoy the pleasure dining gives to others, but I meant only to answer your question as to the place dining holds in fashionable life."

"And who has a better right to speak for fashionable life than you, Cousin Laura? You have adopted it as your own field, have you not?"

"Archie, do you think what you are doing is quite fair?" Mrs. Russell asked.

"I am merely getting Cousin Laura's views about society," Archie rejoined. "I did not think she would object."

"I do not understand why you ask if it is fair," Laura said, turning to Mrs. Russell. "Cousin

Archie knows he may ask me anything about myself, and I will answer frankly. I thought we were just talking to pass the time, but if you want my views about society — why, really, I have never thought about it."

She paused a moment to collect her ideas.

"During two years I have spent a few days off and on, in the gay season, in town," she continued; "I have come to know two sorts of people. One sort was nice enough — true friends with deep feeling and aims — and all that, but I had dull evenings with them. I'm not at all sure I shall think them so dull if I turn 'round and interest myself in the sewing and the courses of reading and the games of whist and the lectures and things which they like. But that takes time, you know, and while I was drifting into ever so many new acquaintances in my first winter, I suddenly, through your friends in the Beaux Arts Club, found a door flung open before me upon the most brilliant, gayest, what you call 'smartest' life — you understand — that I had ever seen. It's nothing to you, who have been in it, or were at liberty to go in it, all your life, Cousin Archie, but it was new to me, and

I suppose I was a little flattered, and one grand event led to another — you understand, Mrs. Russell — and, without letting go my more serious friends with one hand, I reached out with the other, and so divided my time. But, dear me, truly I never thought or talked as much about it in the whole time as I have to-night."

"And it was 'all through Archie's friends' that you saw the thing he's been used to all his life," Mrs. Russell repeated, with mischievous enjoyment. "Oh, Laura, you can take care of yourself."

"I am sure I don't want to, then — or even to be on my guard, against Cousin Archie," Laura answered.

Paton was about to continue the subject when the footman offered a card to him upon a salver.

"What's that?" the novelist exclaimed. "Wants to see me?" He adjusted his glasses to read the card. "Bryan Cross? The deuce! What's he doing here, and how did he know I was in Powellton?"

"Bryan Cross!" Laura exclaimed, in her turn. "Why, that is the name of the man who, the papers say, discovered the murderer of the poor girl whose body was found in the creek."

"Just so," Archie answered; "I mean that would be just like him. Anything extraordinary is just what one expects of him. Will you excuse me? May I ask him to wait, and I'll have him in here for a cigar while I take my coffee. Afterward, if you like, I'll bring him into the drawing-room."

It would have been better for Laura's future peace of mind had she said she did not care to meet Mr. Cross. But what she did say was, "Oh, do! I should so like to see him."

Archie went out, and presently returned.

"He cannot stay," he said, as he spread his napkin over his knee, and began to cut in small pieces the anchovy savoury, with which he had been served. "Now, tell me about this murder, at which Powellton is all agog."

"Which shall come first — the murder, or an account of Bryan Cross?" was Laura's query.

"The murder has introduced him here, it seems."

"That shall be first, then. Well, just beyond here is a village called Wapata, of quarry and mill hands — almost a part of Powellton, you know. In that place lived a girl named Chrystenah Muller, a daughter of a poor widow, and about seventeen or eighteen years old. I noticed her some time ago, on account of her pretty face and neat dress, and I saw her again on the day of her death. She was walking past the gate as I went out of it, with her hands up to her face, crying. I turned toward her to speak to her, to get her to tell me what her trouble was, and, to the longest day I live, I shall be sorry I did not do so, for it may be that I could have saved her life. But two noisy boys, driving very slowly in a grocer's cart, came along, and I thought that if I stopped her they might stop, too, and then she would be ashamed to talk to me. That night she was either murdered or drowned herself in the creek. She had disgraced herself, and it was supposed, until this Bryan Cross said he had found her murderer, that she had taken her own life. Mr. Cross appears to know much more than he has said. Do you know him well, Cousin Archie?"

"I never knew him what you would call 'well,'" said Archie. "We were at Princeton together, where he was the handsome man of my class — the best speaker and, in a way, the most diligent student. He is the son of a Baptist minister who owned the *Clarion,* a religious weekly. Cross was expected to become a minister, but we afterward heard that he could not fit his beliefs to any creed, so he travelled abroad. Then his father died, and he took charge of the *Clarion.* Of late years I have not seen or heard much of him."

He paused, and then added, "But it is a mistake to say that he discovered the murderer, he tells me, — or, indeed, that there was any actual murder. 'A moral murder' is what he calls the crime. And he says that not he, but some one we all know, a member of the Boozers, is the discoverer of the 'moral murderer.'"

"A member of the Boozers," Mrs. Russell exclaimed.

"Why, who?" Laura asked.

"Courtlandt Beekman," was Archie's reply. "But that, I believe, is not to be publicly known. Beekman came up with Cross to pass the time, and studied and mastered the case. I do not suppose it took any genius or exceptional amount of brains, but it is the fashion to think that everything the fellow does is wonderful, and I do not doubt you ladies will follow the fashion. A man who can make such revelations of affairs, which other men would feel that they could not keep sufficiently private — as he did in his examination for admission to the Boozers' Club, the other day, and still keep the esteem of nice people — is really a wonderful person, I must say."

"Archie, why do you dislike him so?" Mrs. Russell asked.

"I don't; I see through him, that's all."

"Oh, then, Mr. Beekman is here," Laura exclaimed, with an eagerness which betrayed itself.

"No, he went back to New York this morning," Paton replied, with a satisfaction he took no pains to conceal.

Thereafter Laura was silent, feeling so much more than she cared to risk saying.

IX.

"YOU ARE ALSO GUILTY"

"Oh, wearisome condition of humanity!" — *Lord Brooke.*

THE inquest into the cause of Teenah Muller's death was held in the lodge-room of the Wapata Hotel, the largest apartment in the village. The hour set for the beginning of the inquiry was ten, but the crowd came much earlier. By ten o'clock the younger bumpkins, a juror or two, and even the coroner, were over supplied with that elixir which is contrarily declared to be such a preservative that one always finds the "oldest inhabitant" beside each village bar, and such a poison that the only uncertain thing about any bottle of it is the exact number of rods at which it will destroy life. The sheds in the rear had proven so insufficient for all the arriving teams that the stable yard itself was filled with buggies and carryalls. For two hours before ten o'clock the barroom had been packed with enlightened American citizens, in soft hats and misfitting clothes of weird design, who walked about as if the floor was made of frozen ploughshares, and kept falling over each other's boots in the process. They slipperied the floor with tobacco juice, and handled their cigars as if their hands were seals' flippers, fumbling them about on the bar, and dropping them once or twice before they finally got their pursed-out lips around the middle of each weed. They swore a great deal, without either reason or skill, and laughed like horses. However, they were happy, and were breaking no law of which they knew. Every jar which country monotony gets has to be celebrated in this way — even a suicide — and already Teenah Muller dead was worth more to Parker, the publican, than all the live women in Wapata had ever been to any man in his line.

The local squire, the sheriff in his silk hat, the old and the young lawyer of the village, the constable, and two of the younger merchants were all in a row, on the broad front porch of the hotel. Those nearest the six heavy supports of the porch roof had their feet well up on them, on a line with their breasts, and were tilting back in their chairs. The two merchants who had no posts, and therefore no place to put their feet, in order to feel at ease, hung one or both legs over their chair arms. Presently the coroner came from the hotel parlour, and looked about him to note the stir his appearance was certain to make. Being a coroner only once or twice a year, and a saddle-maker the rest of the time, his official importance kept its full freshness. He was with Bryan Cross, with whom he seemed mightily taken.

"You kin hint pretty close to who you're givin' it to," he said, with a whiskey-thickened tongue, "but you mushn't speak out nary a name, nohow, er you'll be had up for libill. An' now, ez I told ye afore, fly high, even if you light low, but don't tackle no bird that you can't git away with. 'Be sure yer right,' 's Davy Crockett used ter say, 'then let her go, Gallagher.'"

At the first glance, you might have thought Bryan Cross was an actor. Even at the second and third look, you could not feel certain that he was not. He had all the earmarks of the player, the mobile features, the suggestion of effeminacy, the peculiar prettiness, the apparently studied mannerisms in every pose and movement. He was of the age (twenty-nine) and the graceful form to play Melnotte or D'Artagnan, and needed no make-up to impersonate the love-lorn Italian, Romeo, so jet black was the longish hair that was thrown back from his thin but finely chiselled face. Its every feature was highly sensitive. His large black eyes were full of feeling, the wide nostrils that terminated his Grecian nose quivered when he was excited; his mouth was the instrument of an orator, large, thick-lipped, but also very shapely.

"Come along, Mr. Cross," said the coroner, dissatisfied with the stir, after all, since nine-tenths of it was obviously made by the appearance of the striking youth beside him. "H'are ye, counsellor? H'are ye, sheriff? H're ye, gentlemen? Good-morning. Comin' in to see the fun? Goin' to be a leetle, I reckon."

As they passed through the crowd in the bar-room, the coroner paused again, and whispered to Bryan: "Now, fly high, young feller, but you want to be dam sure and not tackle no bird that you can't git away with."

The crowd broke, and hurried to the lodge-room ahead of the coroner, so that Bryan and he and the reporters had difficulty in getting to the raised platform at the far end of the room. When the witnesses were called, the constable was obliged to sift them through the crowd by pushing two or three men out of the door, and then pulling back each man ahead of him as he led the way to the desk. The evidence taken was wholly unsensational. Chrystenah Muller, called " Teenah " by friends and strangers alike, was found lying in Dockstader's creek, apparently drowned, on a certain day. She was eighteen years old, and had lived in Wapata with her mother, a widow, who asked the coroner, " How cood I look all der vhile afder von girl, vhen I got nine more children, und make, der same dime, a liffing, alretty? " She said her daughter had been a steady girl until a year ago. Then she ceased to work, and began to be disobedient and impudent, leading a stormy life at home, with snubs and chilly glances from her neighbours. The mother did not know who " kept company " with Teenah. None of the neighbourhood youths were good enough for her, she said.

There was the usual formal evidence as to the finding of the body, and the doctor's evidence, which showed that there was an incentive for suicide.

Then the coroner, pulling Bryan over to him, and whispering his injunction regarding high flying and caution with other birds, announced that Mr. Bryan Cross would state what he knew of the case.

"Gentlemen," Bryan began, his thin earnest face in sight of every one, "I came here out of curiosity, with a distinguished friend, who, becoming interested in this sad affair, investigated it. He found it a case of murder, gentlemen — wait, do not interrupt me. My friend led me, step by step, from the finding of the body to the discovery of the murderer, and satisfied me that there could be no mistake. I know who the murderer is, how he committed the crime — every important detail of the shocking story; and the main points I am going to make known to you. But there is one here who could tell the facts even better than I. The murderer himself is here, in this room, listening, looking at me. He is here because he is not afraid. He knows that I will not name him; that you, Mr. Coroner, the most powerful official in the county, cannot lay a hand upon him."

When the speaker said that the murderer was in the room the effect was impressive. There was a second's silence, and then a stir made by nearly every man, turning to look at his neighbours. Two men, marked apart from the crowd by their faces and clothing, became the butts of the threatening glances of all who were close to them. One was Archibald Paton, and the other a rich young man of the neighbourhood, a Mr. Harold Kimball.

" The murderer who feels so safe that he can venture in this place to hear me depict his scoundrelism, in what strength of language I can command, knew her, yet he never visited her home, never wrote to her, never showed himself by her side in her own village, as an honest friend would, in the many months of their companionship. He met her along the roads beyond the town, in his carriage, and only showed himself beside her in other villages, where they were known together as you honest citizens are known with your wives. He was generous with her in little things — in the meanest, smallest way. I mean that he gave her brooches and rings and a watch and the price of a railway ticket, with which she took herself off when he tired of her. These things she did not ask for, but when she came back, in dire need, really requiring something of him at last, he refused her. And for what did she ask, do you think? I am not inventing. I have had repeated to me by one of her companions Teenah's own account of what led up to the murder. She asked to be married. Poor little toy, who did not know she was a toy — who thought that the man who said he loved her possessed a nature above that of a dumb animal. He refused her this return for her trust — this bit of justice. He was not even like a dumb animal to her. Alas! few dumb animals are as base as man can prove himself.

"He offered to give her money, which was a further insult, but she only begged him to undo the wrong they both had done, and reëstablish her in the good opinion of her neighbours. After scorching her with his passion in one form, he struck her down with it in another — that of anger. Angrily, with scorn which seared her, and with bitter, cutting words, he pushed her from his carriage on last Monday evening, saying that he had had enough of her. In twenty-four hours she was found dead in Dockstader's creek. That was how her life was taken. These were the weapons which destroyed it. Do I do wrong to call the case a murder?"

Some one in the crowd of listeners whispered that he had seen the girl in another village with Harold Kimball. Mysteriously, like a flash, the word ran all over the room. When the orator paused, all turned and faced Kimball. He was in the middle of the throng, and the angry, vengeful looks of all the others flew to that common centre, like the spokes of a swift-whirling wheel. The strain upon every one was fearful. It seemed that the breath of every man stopped, and all their hearts pounded heavily in their breasts. A tempest of passion, strong enough to carry such a crowd to any lengths, was at its bursting point. Paton, realising that he, as a well-dressed stranger, might easily be pitched upon as the murderer, admitted, afterward, that he wished himself away. He could not see the real suspect, and did not know that the suppressed violence had already marked other prey.

"It's Kimball! Out with the damned scoundrel! Lynch him!" a man near the door called out.

"Lynch him! Out with him!" cried several others.

A half-tipsy man, close to Kimball, seized his arm, and called out: "I've got the —— dog. Some one get the rope."

Though Kimball was as white as his shirt-front, his nerve stayed by him. "Take your hand off me!" he commanded, and in a tone which might have cowed a rioter less tipsy and less influenced by the passion of the crowd. The man gripped Kimball's arm the tighter, and pulled him along, as the crowd began to sway in a solid mass toward the door.

"Leave that man alone. You are as guilty as he!" Bryan Cross shouted. His voice when raised had a trumpet tone, and now it rang loud and clear.

The mass of men swayed back, and then stood still.

"You are as guilty as he — if he is the murderer," said Cross; "but I have named no man, and will name none. Constable, see that man safely out of the door. Whoever wants to disgrace this town further by doing him harm can find him later in the day, but when you have heard me out, you will not lay a hand on him."

"Now, gentlemen," said Cross, when Kimball was got safely out, "be sure that the murderer, whoever he is, has heard my words, and, in his soul, is punished by this exposure. But how foolish you were to indulge in violence and threats — thus taking into your own use the very weapon with which I told you Teenah Muller was murdered. Is it possible you did not understand me? She was killed by the very thing that just possessed you all — by passion. What matters it that the murderer's passion was lust, and yours was hate, or anger? Ungovernment of ourselves, self-indulgence, self-surrender, loss of self-control — these are the weapons we all are constantly carrying to make every one of us unfit to pass judgment on a crime of violence. These are the crying evils of our age, the mockers of American civilisation. The murderer of Teenah Muller sent her to her death by simply letting go of himself. Tens of thousands — most of us — even you and I — are as guilty as he, in other ways, by the same fault. All alike, we avoid self-discipline. We lose control of our judgment and our tempers, as he did of his desires. He ran unbridled, rough-shod, over a young girl. But what of us? We strike our fellow men or curse them — things this murderer did not stoop to do. We are all possessed by devils that we could cast out with very little effort, yet that little we refuse to exert. We quarrel with our faithful wives, we exhaust the high pressure of our impatient humours upon our servants and workhands, we lash our dumb animals (that are so much better than most of us), and punish our children in anger, when punishment is wasted, and often reacts on ourselves. The fiend Anger is the great red American Devil. It is in nearly all of us. It fills our land with murders, lynchings, negro-burnings, riots, strikes, stabbings, shootings—God alone knows what all! Nearly all of us, I say, are possessed of the devil Anger, and his cousin, Self-will. The most of us have other devils as well — rum-thirst, lust for power or for women, or love of pleasure, or malice or envy — all the imps which stir those passions that we must control if we wish to be believed when we boast that we are better than our brutes.

"Take these things home, and think them over, you who kill your own happiness, as Teenah Muller killed hers, before she took her own life. When you damn an importunate beggar, think how much meaner than he you have made yourself. When you push a too persistent newsboy out of your way, take your hat off to the devil who is riding you. When you slap your child, in a moment of petulance, it must be that he is only a devil's brat, or you couldn't do it. Think of that! And when you strike a man in a fit of choler, think of Teenah Muller, found face down, in a mud-hole, and remember that her murderer was not so great a brute as you.

"I should have liked to find that Teenah Muller died by a stab of steel instead of from mere uncontrolled passion. I should have gloried in naming her slayer, and handing him over to punishment — which only your scorn can impose in this case. But she was slain by no weapon or drug that your honoured coroner can recognise as murderous. Still, I did learn the cause of her death, and I would have been selfish and cowardly if I had not come here to make it public. Put it in your verdict, gentlemen, that

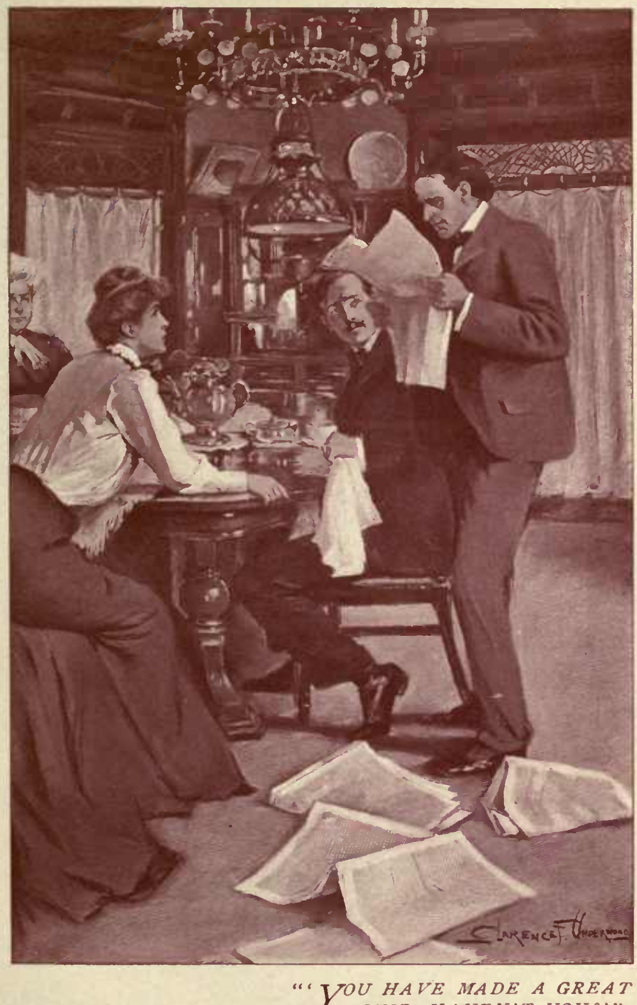
Teenah Muller, through failure to govern herself, strayed in the path of Passion, and was devoured by it. Add a rider saying that the same lack of self-control (or call it a dementia of Egoism if you can understand what that means), is poisoning a myriad lives with anger, worry, lust, surrender to pleasure, envy, malice. Add that this is a dead load we are carrying, yet that each of us can easily lift off his own portion; that it is a fearful epidemic, and yet that every afflicted man can easily doctor himself; that the only effort needed is will-power, the only necessary drug is resolution. Accomplish the general use of these, and we shall all be happier and richer, and America will indeed be the greatest country in the world."

X.

TESTING A CRUSADER'S SWORD

" Who made the yawning gulf 'twixt thee and others?
Know — know thyself — live with the world in peace." — *Goethe*.

WHILE all were at breakfast, on the morning after the inquest, Bryan Cross was announced, and bustled in with an armful of newspapers, — a boyish, impetuous fellow in spite of his twenty-nine or thirty years. It was with an evident effort that he paused to be introduced to the ladies, before he flung himself on a sofa, declaring that he had already broken his fast, and exclaimed: " There are fifteen columns about the inquest in these six papers! My! It *has* made a sensation! Look at the *Herald*, a picture of me that has been made over from an old woodcut of Lincoln, to judge by its looks. And here's the *World*, with a cut of what it calls ' the attempted lynching,' showing me with a fist like a ham, about to pulverise half a dozen men at once."


CLARENCE F. UNDERWOOD

"'YOU HAVE MADE A GREAT STIR, HAVEN'T YOU?'"

"Oh, do let me see, Mr. Cross," Laura said. "You have made a great stir, haven't you?"

"Stir? Why, I wouldn't have dreamed of such good fortune," said Bryan. "It gives me the opening I've prayed for — all in a day. I did not know it was coming; I only knew it had to be — and here it is."

"How astonishing! See, Cousin Archie; here's a whole broadside about him," Laura exclaimed, catching fire from Cross. "'Hands off! You are as guilty as he!' in letters across four columns. Oh, I must read every word of it."

"I never read anything about murders, but I will have to break the rule for this occasion," Mrs. Russell said.

"How do you mean that this does what you want, Cross?" Paton inquired; "what sort of opening has it given you?"

"A chance to talk, man," Cross exclaimed — "to talk — to say what's in me. To rip and smash at the wrong tendencies of the time, and set the people thinking — set them to *seeing* what terrible agencies are at work among us."

He spoke with intense excitement, his eyes sparkling and his voice rising as he talked.

"What's so wrong about things?"

"What?" Bryan echoed with spirit. "What's wrong? Oh, don't start me on what's wrong. Everything — all the things that are separating poor and rich, setting up Brother Leisure and Brother Labour as enemies, in opposing camps. All the things that are creating classes in America — and these appear to be most things, once you begin to look into them. Individualism which ignores common interests, the idolatry of the dollar, commercial immorality, the misuse of capital by monopolies, their pressure upon legislatures, and the spread of shoddy notions of aristocracy. Did you ever think of it? Rightly, the blight of fashionable life begins at the flower and seed of spent families, but, with us, it is reaching down to the ranks of the clerks in the very shoe stores, down among those who should be the robust stalk of society, just above the roots which are the toilers, who must be the strength and hope of every nation that can boast of hope."

Laura turned in her chair, astonished and thrilled. Earnestness like that was new and wonderful to her.

"You've got an army contract, apparently," Archie commented, over his egg and steaming roll.

"Not when one feels his mission and his power; its size only spurs one to give it harder battle," said Cross.

"I know — but 'what's the use?'" Archie said, echoing the motto of his Bohemian guild; "what's the use? I've seen something of all that you speak of, and have thought of writing it into my books, but the world would roll along in its old way over my books, as it will over your speeches — as it does over even its Himalayas and Alps, by the way."

"Perfect! Splendid!" Cross shouted, and, in his nervous way, whipped out of his pocket a small notebook and pencil. Then he began to write hastily. "Excuse me a moment," said he; "I just wanted to put down what you said — every word of it. It exactly reflects the conditions I mean to sail into. 'What's the use?' that's a text for a scorching lecture on the apathy and indifference which are all around us, even where we should look, as in the case of intelligent men like you, for hearty, stiff-backed opposition to the evils that are sapping our virtues and strength as a nation."

" Humph," Archie said, drily, " I don't doubt I could give you many such points. Stick to me, Cross, and I'll equip you for a whole campaign."

" I am sure," Laura interposed, " it's very noble of Mr. Cross — though I don't understand these things that are so terrible."

" My campaign, as you term it, begins at once," Cross continued. " I am to speak at the funeral of the poor girl — at her grave, to-morrow — and all the reporters are to be there, so that my chance to rivet public attention to what I talked of at the inquest will be as good as it could possibly be, and it will depend only on myself whether I am to begin a useful career at last. I tried to do it in *The Clarion,* but its readers are the narrowest, and as I am very liberal, I simply killed it — or all but that."

" You are going to remain in the village, then? " Laura inquired. " Won't you do us the honour to stay here? Let me send to the hotel for your things."

" Thank you; I should like that very much," Bryan answered. " I am rather tangled up with the crowd at the hotel. I move in a regiment, as it were — of reporters and idlers and cranks. I had seven men in my room when I began to undress for bed, last night. It's novel, I'll admit, to feel as if you were a large part of the public, but it begins to wear on you in time. I'd rather get my things myself, if I may, and drive away as if to Fishkill, so as to come here without betraying my destination; otherwise your garden would soon be as full of my tormentors as it now is of blades of grass and flowers."

"You shall be perfectly safe and quiet here," Laura said. "We'll instruct the servants that you are not to be disturbed. Well, gentlemen, we will leave you to your cigars and newspapers."

After the three ladies retired, with a stiff bit of human timber in livery holding the door open for them, the men disposed of themselves in postures more comfortable than elegant, and fell upon their newspapers.

"Well, Cross, you certainly have made a sensation," said Archie. "In our days everybody gets newspaper distinction. Shop-girls enjoy their portraits in the Sunday papers, and even my 'guinney' bootblack carries a half-column clipping about himself in his pocket-book, but three-column spreads with scare head-lines are the rewards of few, and the hope of still less. I must say you deserve it even better than the average reader will think, for what you said does not read a hundredth part as it sounded. You are a born orator. You made me tingle, I confess."

"I believe that what I said had never been spoken before, though I got my cue from a well-known little book of American philosophy. But I will do better at the cemetery, for I have leave to talk an hour."

They continued to read the papers, and presently the eye of Bryan Cross fell upon something that sent the blood rushing to his face. It was a small paragraph which he read again and again. As he did so his chin fell lower and lower, the muscles which had held his body so rigidly and proudly erect relaxed, and he sat limp and bent upon the sofa, a dejected caricature of the man who had come into the room like a crowned hero.

"See here, old man," he said to Archie. "I must ask you to let me bore you a minute."

"Go ahead," Archie replied.

"Well, you know when *The Clarion* began to run down, and it was evident that it would soon cease to pay, I put it in the market, and began to look around for something else to do. I thought of reporting as a makeshift which might lead to something better, and I went to Sam Woodruff, our old classmate, you know, who is city editor of the *Evening Star*. He offered to let me start a religious column in the Saturday paper, and I did it, and it has gone well. Now, here is a letter in *The Chronicle,* saying that I wrote that column, but that it was only done to hide my real work, which was the exposure of church scandals in the paper. My Heavens! It is terrible! Just as I have made myself the opportunity of my life — to see the door dashed in my face like that!"

"Why? Do you mean that the charge is true? Let me see what it says," Archie replied, taking the paper and reading the paragraph. "Did you 'pry into the differences between pastors and their flocks, and magnify the peccadilloes of the clergy into crimes as well as distort worthless rumours into nauseous sensations'?"

"Never. On my word that is a lie, but it has just basis enough to damage me as if it were true. I wrote news of the churches — whatever it was, as it came along. And if there was trouble in a church, or a quarrel between a minister and his vestrymen or elders, or whoever, I wrote the bare facts — just as I wrote the news that was good, or that which was of an indifferent tenor. In six months I only reported five or six scandals. It was the city editor who took these paragraphs, and worked them up into sensations."

"Well, then, what do you care?"

"But, don't you see? if I say so in a letter to *The Chronicle*, the man who wrote this may be — probably is — some reporter who knows that the city editor sometimes sent to me for further facts, which I had not written, and which I freely told, though not for pay. I never could be so base as that. But it will appear so; give a lie twenty-four hours' start, and you never can overtake it, you know. I shall be — oh, Paton, I am the most unfortunate beggar on earth. All my life some little mistake, some impulsive word or thoughtless act, has always come up to overcloud my prospects."

"Well, you're not going to be such an ass as to stir this up by writing letters about it, are you? There's nothing to worry about. It's merely a question of good taste — how, being connected with the cloth and yourself on the edge of the ministry — "

Bryan groaned.

"You could expose its weaknesses for pay or friendship, or under any circumstances."

"Oh," Bryan moaned, "this will kill my sister, who is at death's door, and whose regard I value more than life itself. What shall I do? Can you advise me? What way shall I turn?"

"Now that this new field is open to you, are you going into the pulpit, or are you going to lecture?"

"I was going to lecture," Bryan said.

"Well, it doesn't matter," replied Archie; "I was about to say that if you were going to preach, you might some day have to explain this trifling matter to the officials of your church in private, but whatever you mean to do, don't let it bother you."

"It will wreck me, and kill my sister."

"You are the same Bryan Cross you were in college," Paton said, crossing the room, and putting a friendly hand on the wretched man's shoulder. "You were always imagining yourself in trouble then; always doing or saying some indiscreet thing, and then magnifying it into a mountain. Come, cure yourself of this, if you mean to get on. It's all damned nonsense. You are worrying over nothing, preparatory to inveighing against worry to-morrow. Can't you see how absurd it is? Chuck that newspaper in the fire, and its contents out of your head, and, mark my words, you will never hear of the subject again. If you do, what of it? You didn't do what the man charges. Our friend, Sam Woodruff, on the *Evening Star,* would deny it in a moment if it were worth while. Now brace up and face the splendid prospect ahead. Hang the past; the future's unclouded for you, old man."

"I value what you say, Paton," said Cross, straightening his figure a little and lifting his head a trifle under this encouragement, "because you are not concerned and can see the thing clearly. Thank you very much. I'll try and not let it worry me."

"No, don't try," Archie added, with a little irritability, "I don't take any stock in trying; it's a copybook virtue. Do it — doing's better than trying. There, now it's done. You've forgotten it for ever. Read your papers and come out among the trees and flowers and take a bath in the beauty of nature and the good spirits of my fair cousin. Remember, you are starting a clean page without a blot upon it."

XI.

A FAINT SOUND OF CUPID'S WINGS

"The young day opened in exulting splendour." — *Goethe.*

THE most important fact about Laura at this time was that she was but opening the door upon her real life. She was just beginning. Up to a year ago she was rather going to be than being, for the years of man's reckoning in such a case are no criterion of a person's status in character formation. The flesh and blood medium or vehicle had been there — sunny-haired, sky-blue-eyed, radiant, vigorous, lovely. And her amiability and goodness — rock foundations for coming character — had been very apparent, like her love of life. But the force and purpose of her intellect and soul, the will she was to possess, the directions in which it was to be exerted, the impress her influence was to make upon her circle, were all more or less undefined.

Throughout her occasional evenings of modish amusement in New York she had never spent an hour without the protection of some experienced woman on whom she relied for guidance. And in her short career as a philanthropist in Powellton she had profited by the sturdy influence of the Rev. York Stone. His strong hand led her far outside her house, as we have seen, but fell limp and idle the moment her home duties or her pleasures came to the fore. Thus Laura Lamont was coming into existence, was developing within the mere pretty temple which we call by her name. What she was to do, hold to or let go, not even she had any means of predicting.

Cousin Archibald Paton — second cousin, really — was in the garden, out of the sun's glare, under the trees where they were thickest, near the high front wall. He was to catch a train just after lunch, and was wondering who would be at the club as early as he would get there — because the day was broken and there was no use of thinking of settling down to work. Laura had asked him to stay till Monday, but Mrs. Russell had whispered to him that he would be bored to death with another evening there. That was nonsense, he said to himself. He could stay very comfortably; in fact, he would ask Laura to let him come down, presently, for a long visit. The quiet would be just what he needed for work upon his new book. He would have to talk to Laura a great deal, and talking to young unmarried women — unless they were actresses or dancers — was growing more and more irksome to him of late. But if he was to settle down anywhere with any one it had better be here with Laura than anywhere or with any one else. Just now, however, a college friend from Chicago and another from St. Paul were in town, and he must run up and take them the round of the theatres, and dine them every night at the club and the new restaurants in a way in which he excelled and that they would not soon forget.

He would wire both of them to meet him in the evening, and some friends would be at the club in the afternoon, so that he could play "bridge" to kill the hours until it was time to dress. "Damn it," he thought, "if I had fallen heir to this place instead of Laura, and if there were a few congenial men in the village and a billiard-table here — and New York only ninety minutes away — I could — still it would be infernally dull."

At this stage of his thoughts he heard a light sound of the gravel behind him, and, turning quickly, saw his fair cousin, with both hands held out a little way toward him, hesitatingly and a trifle dejectedly. She put her hands back when he turned, dropped them by her sides, and blushed.

"Why, Cousin Laura! What's up?"

"Oh, I don't know," in a low wailing tone. "Nothing. Only you're going away — that's it."

"But then, I'm not here so often and haven't been here so long as to make my going disturb you."

Laura gave him one hand, and she left it in his grasp in a way that was eloquent of trust and of deep emotion besides — for she did not speak. The truth was that she had been longing for this cousin to come — this man who had so heroically seen her step into his uncle's property without uttering a sound of resentment — and now he had visited her and was going away, and she was disappointed without exactly knowing why.

"What is it, cousin?" Archie asked again, tenderly. " I thought you were always so happy and cheerful. What is it? Do tell me."

He spoke tenderly, I say, for the situation was one to rouse all the tenderness in any man. Fancy the combination made by the retired place, the beauty and youth of the girl, his imaginative nature, that first sight of her with her hands stretched toward him, and now her evident sadness. He would not have believed he could do such a thing, for he had never more than touched her hand before, but — there — it was done; his arm was around her waist! My! what a dainty, soft, silken creature she was, and how exquisite was the sweet odour of her golden hair as she let her head fall upon his breast. What an armful for a man to find himself holding — and even pressing a little — and it not resisting, but, rather, nestling against him as if it yielded to a right of his. Who thought of actresses and dancers a moment ago? Faugh! Ye gods! fancy possessing the right to hold so beautiful, pure, and lovely a creature in one's arms. Confound it — not " damn it " now, for the best of his better nature was in control — confound it! No man who ever lived was worthy of such a prize, or fit to aspire to such.

"Tell me — what has made you unhappy, little cousin?"

"You have Cousin Archie."

"I?"

"You are displeased with me."

"Displeased with you?" The selfish crust had cracked, the pretence of objection to marrying an unformed wife was forgotten. Even the solid marble palace of the Madison Club was beginning to look shadowy.

"You think I am not serious, and that I only wish to live for dinners and frivolity."

"I think you are my dear little cousin, of whom not even you shall say such harsh things."

"See? You call them harsh," said Laura, catching at the word. "You want to be kind now, because I — I am unhappy. But you set a trap to make me condemn myself last night. I know what Mrs. Russell meant by asking you if it was fair, though I would not let her think I understood her. And it was fair. You are my only relative who is friendly, and I will always thank you to criticise me."

"I hope I never shall even seem to again." Still with an arm around her, deep under the trees, out of sight and sound of house and road; his bachelor quarters looking cramped and tiresome, and the club-house a hateful place.

"But I'd rather you would, Cousin Archie," said she, still whimpering a little, partly from concern over his past behaviour, partly to encourage his present course. "I'd much rather you would counsel me, and let me show you how much I should value your advice than — than to keep on displeasing you, and — and have you stay away and think ill of me."

"Oh, come," said he; "is the cousin who says I stay away not at all related to a certain little witch whom I am visiting even at the moment that she chides me for my absence?"

"Yes, but — " sighs all going now, and a pout separating them; "I cannot be satisfied with so little as that. It may be that I am selfish — or that I feel so all alone in life. You have come only twice, and then only when I thought a little more of such neglect must mean that you disliked me."

An image of stone would, almost, have realised what that speech implied, and Archie had been only ice, not stone. What he realised most was that he was melting, and that the sensation was more pleasant than that of his long bachelor refrigeration had been. Laura cooed and pouted, and he kept silent and thought, merely drawing her closer now and then, and brushing his moustache across her hair. He was beginning to recall the same feelings that came with his first love adventure, when he was very callow, and had a pious reverence for a girl who, in that case, proved extremely mortal and flirtatious. Now he was again thinking of a woman as a goddess, and disparaging himself. And he was saying to himself how clearly right Helen Russell was about the hardening selfishness of club-life. He saw himself entering the club-house on Fifth Avenue, the stewards bowing, the head porter handing him some letters. He turned out of the hall and walked through a series of rooms, comfortable and luxurious beyond any that the average bachelor could possess were he to marry, and consequently tempting such not to marry. He fancied the usual loungers here and there. "Hello, Dan," he dreamed himself saying; "tired of your prison? Well, I should think so." "Hello, Robbins, you here in your daylight state of trance, waiting for night and the theatres and drinks and soubrettes and the rest of your suicidal programme?" "Ah, there, Thompson — man of idiot mind who can do nothing under heaven but play cards. Have to get up a game without me." "Good afternoon, colonel — how purple your face is, and how strange that I never saw before how porcine you look — what's keeping you alive? Hope of another gorge to-night? That will make fifty in succession; you'll have to hurry faster than apoplexy if you want much more of your gluttonish life." "How d'do, Mr. Rickham and Mr. Colt? Still at the window? Has young Mrs. Dash gone by with the riding master at Pegasus' Academy? Yes? And old Dash saw them — and you saw him see them? As a matter of fact, there is nothing about it that he did not know and does not approve of, but you enjoy your imaginings better than the truth, and fancy yourselves repaid for keeping your chalky faces six months at that window." "No, no, Billy; no billiards. I'm going out — to get the air."

Out in the air Laura was purring and his moustache was still brushing her perfumed hair.

"Have you any news of Cousin Jack?" she asked, referring to the relative who had attempted to secure her by a crime as a means of winning her fortune.

"Oh, let us not soil our lips or minds with thoughts of that brute," Archie rudely replied. "Let us talk of ourselves — of yourself most of all."

His rudeness wounded her, but she forgave him.

"I'm going to write a novel about a girl in your position," said Archie. "Not in criticism of you; but showing what another girl, older, of a different temperament, might do. As for you, cousin, I would not have you different — if you are happy."

"I am not altogether frivolous," she said. "If you knew what bold ideas I am trying to carry out in the village. But you have never inquired. You are not interested. The Rev. Mr. Stone is helping me to be useful in a small way — but tell me what you suggest."

"Oh, parsons! Parsons and women! Dear cousin, do you think parsons embody all wisdom?" Archie inquired, lacking the modesty and breadth to ask what it was that the parson and the woman were doing, in this case. "They cannot know the needs of men. Priests and actors are half women or half children, where practical things are concerned. I cannot say, offhand, what my heroine will do; improved tenements, or sports for the poor, or the establishment of coffee clubs made as attractive as the barrooms; not hung with placards that insult people's pride and intelligence or full of the usual chilling atmosphere of such places."

"I cannot wait for your novel," Laura replied, a great deal hurt by his contempt for the man whose cheerful and useful service demanded that she should be his champion. She had been hurt by Archie twice in ten minutes — but her dream state was proof against both blows.

"I'll come and write it here, and read over to you each night what I've written during the day."

"Will you?" Laura cried, surprised out of her momentary pain. "Then you are my good cousin, after all; almost as good as I have ever believed you to be."

She turned her sky-blue eyes and fruity cheeks and rosy lips up toward his face. He put both arms around her and drew her against himself and kissed her. A last frozen muscle of his heart must have thawed.

It was not a lover's kiss; she who knew nothing of kisses beyond those of her own sex realised that on the instant. Much less was it the kiss of the lady novelists of the day, which sets the skies aflame and causes the earth to rock. It was a chaste, paternal-like kiss, expressing a kindly interest which hesitates on the edge of committing itself to anything not well considered. As he raised his head after this chaste and frugal dispensation, he saw Mrs. Russell before him at the junction of two paths, on one toe, fluttering between flight and bold acknowledgment of her presence. Archie released Laura so suddenly that the maiden suspected discovery, and flushed crimson at the proof of it.

"Dear friends," said Mrs. Russell, advancing radiant; "I would rather it were I than any one else who saw you." (Here a pause.) "And I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

"Are — con — grat — ula — tions — in — order?" she went on, accentuating her uncertainty by uncommon pauses between syllables.

" Don't be silly, Helen," Archie said. " By the way, I'm going to ask Cousin Laura, before we go to the house, if I may come here to do a bit of writing — a little later, when my book is under way."

" And we are to be like real cousins for as long as I can make him happy," Laura added.

" Well, I never ! " Mrs. Russell remarked to her, when they were safe in the confidential or bedroom story of the house. " When I saw — er — what I could not help seeing, I was ready to shout for joy. But the tone and manner you both put on immediately afterward — well, it did dash my castles to the earth. I don't understand it at all."

" You *were* silly," said Laura. " It was only a — I mean it was not anything, not in the least."

Already analysis of that first kiss brought a realisation of her disappointment. She felt that her cousin would never offer her a second kiss. And she knew that, if he ever should do so, her self-respect would not permit her to receive it.

Her first kiss had been like a dagger in a tragedy. It had slain the first-born and oldest of her day-dreams of love.

Archie, for his part, stamped his own opinion of his tenderness with the muttered words, "What an ass I made of myself!"

He was entering the great tiled hall of the mansion when Mrs. Lamont slipped out of a side door and ran to him, somewhat stealthily, with a mixture of shrewdness and pleading in her look, and, pressing his hand, whispered, "Be kind to her always, won't you?"

XII.

BRYAN CROSS'S EXPOSURE OF "SOCIETY"

> "Yet deemst thyself so far above thy brothers,
> That thou hast won the right to scorn them." — *Goethe.*

THE lunch party was only saved from being too constrained by the attempts of Mrs. Russell to arouse the others. Laura was still wondering how to regard that somewhat gelid first kiss, feeling that it lacked something, perhaps a great deal, but having no previous experience to serve as a standard of comparison. And, too, she marvelled at the sudden charging of her atmosphere with opposition to society — and opposition to her, also, for going in for its pleasures; to society, above all things; society, which she had supposed to be the aim and sum of genteel existence. Archie, for his part, was withdrawing into his refrigerator, and pulling the door shut, gradually. He was annoyed at the free hand he had given to his feelings in bestowing any kiss at all until he had seen more of Laura's purpose in life — and of his friends at the club. He would have flattered himself that it was not a kiss which committed him to anything, if he only were sure that Laura thought as little of it. Bryan Cross was prostrated by the terror inspired by the paragraph in the *Chronicle.* He did not look any more like his former self than he felt; indeed, he seemed to grow haggard while the others regarded him; to become heavily lined in the face, worried, with the flash gone from his eyes, the spinal column out of his back, the stiffening out of whatever had kept his chin in air when he had faced the angry villagers at the inquest.

A stupid lunch party. The sooner it was over the better, since everybody's mind was busied with its own affairs. Even Mrs. Lamont was affected by the discordant mental influences around her. She could only ascribe them to jealousy of Mr. Paton on the part of Mr. Cross, for the poor lady thought of little else than her daughter's marrying, and considered each new masculine visitor as another suitor. In spite of the flowers and crystal and silver, the dainty dishes and sparkling wines, and the decorous waiters in livery — how that midday meal did drag!

"Good-bye," said Bryan to Archie, when they were by themselves in the smoking-room for a moment; "I'm sorry I put a damper on the lunch, though it seemed to me every one else was pulling sidewise. I can't get that *Chronicle* letter out of my mind, and I'm blue as an Italian lake."

"Well, all I can say," said Paton, "is that you remind me of the grizzly that reared up on the track ahead of an express train to fight the locomotive. As the locomotive remarked to that bear, 'You must love trouble.' My dear Cross, if you did furnish church scandals to a paper, what of it? And since you didn't, there's even less of it. Why don't you worry about real things, if you must worry? For instance, about what that girl's betrayer, Kimball, will do if he meets you."

"I don't care a fig for what he does," Cross replied. "I am never afraid when I'm right, and I'm never afraid of any man except myself. It's my own weaknesses that give me all my worries."

"You contradict the proverb that 'a watched pot never boils,'" Archie persisted, "for you are always watching yourself and yet you're always stewing. Believe me, you can whip up a little trouble like the white of an egg, till it will fill a washbowl, — but it's all froth when you've done it."

When the crunching of the carriage wheels died out of his hearing, Bryan once again picked up the *Chronicle* to nourish his misery with new force, but to his astonishment he discovered that the leading editorial was a ringing endorsement of his remarks at the inquest, and predicted that a young man of such eloquence, earnestness, and self-control, coupled with the power to master an angry audience, must yet make himself felt in the world. "He perceives a common weakness and evil," said the editor. "He has shown not merely the courage to attack it, but a command of vision over its full extent, and a skill that cuts into its heart. The people in every walk of life will pause this morning to read his words as the few paused yesterday, even in a paroxysm of passion. Bryan Cross holds a nation in waiting to hear more of what he has to say. His success as a reformer, a leader, or even as a mere lecturer, is limited only by his own capacity."

Sensitive, as, happily, few men are; now plunged into black despair by an imagining and, anon, lifted to serene heights by success, or to superhuman effort by a mere chance made roseate by his optimism, Bryan began to feel himself raised up by this comment of one who, he argued, must have seen the mosquitoish paragraph in the same paper, yet gave it no concern. His face regained colour, the haggard lines softened, his eyes sparkled, and he lifted his shoulders and head, and threw off the trouble that had been astride of him. Miss Lamont came in and found him in this new mood.

"Won't you come and visit me?" she asked him. "Don't throw away your cigar. This is Liberty Hall as far as smoking is concerned. Gentlemen may smoke anywhere in it. Will you come? I am burning to have you clear my mind about something."

"Now, what is it about society?" she asked, when Mr. Cross and she were comfortably seated on either side of Mrs. Lamont in the sewing-room. "What is there wrong about what we call 'genteel life,' the current which flows through the drawing-rooms and ballrooms and dining-rooms of those who endeavour to observe the nicer ways of life? My cousin, Mr. Paton — "

" Really, only her second cousin," Mrs. Lamont interposed.

" — is displeased with me — or I imagine he is, for having spent my visits to town rather idly, in a social way, and though I am not aware of having done anything amiss, I suspect that you, too, hold a grievance against what is called a fashionable or ' society ' existence, and I want to ask you why."

" I sometimes think I have a mission in the world," said Bryan, " and so I bid you tremble. A man with a mission is a devouring lion who pays no heed to time or place or feelings or individuals. You will rouse the lion if you persist in your questions, for the exposure of ' society ' is part of my mission."

" I am not a bit afraid," Laura replied, with guilty reservations that belied her tone of courage.

" Well, society — the highest form of organised social intercourse — has no place in this country, because its headquarters is the antechamber (just as it is itself the shadow) of a royal court. Any exclusive set not connected with a throne is a Brummagen society, a fraud and sham, an imitation. A monarch, his family and his highest nobles, must have entertainment and companionships, a world in which to move — however small — so they set up a *haut monde,* composed of persons of rank and means in order that they may live and yet be differentiated from the common herd. Mark that: the very *raison d'être,* the essence, the first aim, of so-called 'society' is separation from the people. To maintain such an institution here is un-American, undemocratic, poisonous to the republic, wicked, dangerous. We have always had here a sham aristocracy — the laughing-stock of Europe and the disgust of our own good citizens. It began with a few un-American families with real or pretended high origin or connection abroad, and these were abetted and encouraged by others who had merely money and leisure. I am speaking of the Northern States, where the possession of money has long since become the first essential with this set, the wealthy having so far outnumbered the original élite that birth is a second-ary and non-essential qualification. It is an Anglo-Saxon peculiarity, this; in England Jews, company promoters, and, in fact, any one who has money, enters society, but this is a perversion of the true character of the institution and only obtains there and here.

"But, to return to America," he continued; "I will admit that this class had to exist, even here, for it was the last expression of energy on the part of expiring families — the flower — the thing that comes at the end of a plant's existence. Mark that, too, please: genuine high society connected with a court may have vigour, constantly recruited by wise marriages; but mock society is the rendezvous of the effete and played-out families which are making their final blaze of efflorescence. It is the natural process that the top shall wither and die and be constantly replaced from the bottom. When that process had been too long and too completely arrested we had the French Revolution. To-day we see by the condition of the masses in England that a new balance must be struck there by revolution within or by some catastrophe from outside. The same conditions are all observable here, though in an earlier stage.

"Here in the United States we find that the dollar, which admitted the few cads of a quarter of a century ago to the companionship of our select set, has become an idol. The dollar is the national god. To accumulate dollars is the single aim of almost every man of force and brain, so that government and public leadership are left to the mob, while talent confines itself to money-making. Our men having made the money, our women have found out what to do with it. They have invested it in 'society;' in founding an exclusive set if they had not one at hand, or if they could not enter the one they had. Hence the gradual broadening of the institution — or imitation — until it poisons every class above the toilers. I have watched this growth everywhere from New York to San Francisco, and have scarcely known any variation of the process. First, a man by force of brain or opportunity makes money, and becomes wrapped up in the making of it, as heedless of further purpose as the squirrel that will continue to hoard nuts in the same tree trunk, though you carry them off as fast as he brings them. Then comes the wife or daughter, bitten by the national serpent, and lays out part of that money to lift herself from the level of the people of whom she is by birth and training a part, into some pretentious, snobbish circle where the talk is of 'my man' or of 'my maids,' where every day's and evening's pleasure is measured by its cost in dollars and every man's and woman's standing by the amounts they spend.

"These are cads, Miss Lamont, and the ways of cads," Bryan went on. "Cads — the meanest of all the species of the vulgar. But we have not noticed the worst evil yet. The worship of the dollar has extended — the application of the banker's scales to the weighing of all merit and worth — has gravitated downwards until to-day only those who work with their hands are healthy — and despised. The chasm between the rich and poor is widened as it is nowhere else except in England, so that the middle class and lower middle class, as they say over there, are now on the side of the rich. All ties between the bottom and top are broken, the middle folk who were the friends of the poor have pushed the poor aside, and only live to ape the rich. Dear Miss Lamont, the wife of a reporter whom I know, a man on sixty dollars a week, has 'Thursdays' on her cards. Have you thought what that means? It is a formal declaration that she is living for herself, for purely sensual, selfish pleasure, and to the neglect of husband, home, children, and all the duties of her proper and natural place in the world. It means that, or else it means that this is what she aims at and cherishes and wishes she could do. Well, this sixty dollars a week 'society' woman has 'Thursdays' on her cards, and talks about whom 'she can meet' and whom she cannot meet. She moves out of a decent street, where the rents are within her means, into a flat (which is to say a place too small to permit of proper privacy and the pride and self-respect which home ownership engenders) because the other neighbourhood was 'too poor,' and there were 'dirty people' there. She lives up to the last cent of every dollar, with doctor, dentist, and grocer in arrears, while her husband admits that his most sacred aim is, not to save anything, but to keep his insurance premiums paid up. What makes up her 'set' of the people 'she can meet'? The wives of a school principal, of a clerk in a railroad office, of the manager of a branch telegraph office, and of a few reporters. Are you astonished? You cannot be, because you cannot have been to any town or city where the same is not the case. Everywhere, nowadays, each country weekly has its 'society column,' which chronicles the reception by Miss Jessamine Brown, 'the queenly daughter of our popular boot and shoe dealer,' and the dance given by Mrs. Marie Perkins Hogg, wife of the well-known grocer, 'to which was invited a select company.' The disease is not merely dollar worship — it is self-worship. This is the age of individualism, of selfishness, and its motto is 'To the devil with the others so long as I'm on top.'"

"Be more personal, please," Laura said; "bring the situation home to me. I am neither a grocer nor a telegraph clerk. I have a visiting day, but have no children or husband, so that I am not neglecting them. I have been taken into a set led by Mrs. Beverley Russell and Mrs. Charles Kellogg, you know — the architect and the great lawyer. And I have seen a great deal of the circle in which are the Egerton-Woods and Mrs. Mowbray-Stanton — the bankers' wives. What about them?"

"Think for yourself," Bryan replied. "Think whether the wives you meet are denying themselves children so as to be free from that care. Think, if they have children, whether they are being brought up by servants toward the same end. Think whether the aims, principles, and general topics discussed in those houses are high, serious, elevating. What are their manners and feelings toward their servants? Try to recollect what poor families they visit continually, what poor children they are educating, what concern and sympathy for the unfortunate, the sick and the helpless are shadowed in their conversation. Recall whether, when you dine with them, you ever meet the managers and chief clerks of their banks and the wives of these assistants of the bankers, on terms of brotherhood at their table?"

"You know none of these things are customary," Laura answered. "They are things I never thought of."

"But why? What do you find unnatural about them? Miss Lamont, the unnatural and wrong things are what you do find — and find most exaggerated among the two most artificial peoples on earth, the English and the Americans.

But if, as you say, the things I ask about are not customary, then let me ask you what is customary? Is it a life of pretence of superiority to the masses? Is it an exclusiveness which confines itself to those who have the power and the inclination to spend money on entertainments and pleasure? Is it a hardening of the heart to every consideration, every plea, every condition which disturbs their sense of ease and comfort and pleasure — for which things alone they live? Carlyle, surrounded by similar conditions in England, called it the Age of Barabbas and, again, the Age of the Belly, but though a chief stone in the arch of evil may be the dining-table, I assure you that all the other senses are receiving far more than a healthy consideration. Your set may confine its ministrations to the nourishment of false pride, the ossification of the human heart, and the titillation of the palate. God knows I hope it is so. That is the case with 'society' in Chillicothe and Plainfield and Watertown, Wisconsin. But these are apprentices to the scheme — as even New York is, in a way; for it has not yet come to the Roman plan of serving a course of hot water after a choice dish in order that a second serving may be newly enjoyed."

Laura put up a hand in protest.

"You may be of the apprentices," Cross continued; "but the natural consequences of a sensualist's — which is to say a 'society' existence not based on genuine worth or pride of pedigree — are such as even you must have seen the signs of: in the eccentricities of women's dress invented by men modists in the sensual capital of the world; in the familiarising and popularising of paintings and statues of the nude; in the character of the performances now given in the theatres and the invasion of the music halls by ladies, who have only lately been willing to witness all that is shown in them; in the topics discussed by the writers whose works attract the most attention in high life; in the evident purpose of the so-called 'music of the future.' I scarcely think you can know, Miss Lamont, how servile a handmaiden of all the senses the more advanced in high society have become."

"No," said Laura, made uneasy by the drift of the talk; "I know nothing of all this, and I think, if you don't mind, I'd rather not know.

So far as we have been able to follow you, mamma and I, we have gained a great deal to think about — a great deal we did not know, haven't we, mother?"

"Mr. Cross reminds me of Mr. Thynne, whom we knew in Paris," Mrs. Lamont said. "I heard you mention Paris, Mr. Cross. My daughter and I lived there: she was mainly educated there."

"I also know Paris," Cross replied. "There are two Parises, though one is but little known — the one that is made up of homes and is as wholesome as Philadelphia."

"Are you married, Mr. Cross?" Mrs. Lamont asked.

"No, ma'am," said he; and then, after a pause, during which it was evident that his mind flew to other scenes, he added: "Not married, yet very much wedded."

Out in the garden, in the cool of the evening, when Laura and he were lounging among the flowers and solidifying their acquaintance, as each brought out from the other the points on which both could base a friendship, she reminded him of this subject.

"That was a strange answer you made to mother when she asked if you were married," said she.

"I only meant," said Cross, "that though I am not married, I am wedded to the care of the best woman — present company always excepted — upon whom to-day's sun has shone; but she is an invalid sister instead of a wife."

Then, in a few graphic sentences, he described to his companion the woman for whose trust and esteem he cared more than for all else that the world could offer him, — a wasted wreck, imprisoned at home by a lingering illness, hung as it were above the grave by threads as delicate as cobwebbery, yet still a beautiful woman to look upon, ever serene, unvaryingly hopeful, amiable as an angel, and with an intellect and intuition so clear and keen as to cause her at times to appear gifted beyond the compass of men's minds.

"Dear lady," said he, addressing her in a fashion most singular, which yet did not sound as it might from a person less intense; "dear lady, when I try to measure the love I bear for one woman who is not only a sister but a shadow, I grow aghast at the thought that I might one day love, as most men come to do, some woman of solid flesh, of equal charm of mind and person. The thought terrifies me. I pray that if it must be, she prove to have the strength and wisdom to restrain me, otherwise I should abandon all else, and give up my life to an idolatry of her."

"You cannot mean that," Laura replied, catching only a glimmering idea of the life he outlined as of something madly romantic; "what woman would value a love like that?"

"How then do you picture love?" he inquired.

"Oh, I? I cannot tell. I don't suppose I have ever thought about it — not really. How would a woman think of it except as a consecration of her life to her husband? Would she not enter into her new life with awe, trembling before its mysteries, humbled by thoughts of her own unworthiness, and yet clinging desperately to the rock of her husband's love? I cannot express the sense I have either of the majesty of love or of its exquisite tenderness. Do you know Schumann's songs of a woman's love and life? In them the words and music picture a woman's feelings more truly than anything I can imagine or have ever read."

"I owe you an apology," said Bryan. "When you asked me to bring home to you what I had to say against fashionable life, I tried to do it. I was a fool. I had no idea I could be such a fool. Society is not likely to do you any harm. It may try — but it can't hurt you."

"But what should I do, Mr. Cross? I am not a 'society woman.' I have merely coquetted with society — and a very plain and unpretentious part of it at that. But, wait! Do not speak yet, please. Let me frankly confess, first, that though I do not think myself better than my humblest neighbours, I do love the luxurious and brilliant side of life, and the company of all who are both honest and clever among those who ornament it. I love the beautiful, the ornamental, the luxurious, and I admire grace and charm and style in both the intellects and personal bearing of refined men and women. Is that wicked? And if I feel this inclination what must I do? I have never felt any hardening consequences. I am not blasé and those who affect to be so always repel me. Tell me what I am to do — but, first, believe me when I say that I am not conscious of any false pride or sin or shame in doing as I have done."

"My God!" Cross broke out with startling emphasis. "Do you ask me to bid you decide between inclination and duty? Me? I — who live a lie, whose life has become hell for the lack of a little courage? Spare me, Miss Lamont. Seek counsel of the vagrant winds, of the wanton waves of yonder river — yes, seek it of the criminals in the jails — rather than of such as I."

"Why, Mr. Cross!" Miss Lamont exclaimed, her eyes wide with astonishment, her attitude one of amazement and a little, too, of alarm.

"Oh, forgive me, Miss Lamont," Cross replied. "I am rude to disturb you with my misery. But I take nothing back. Seek no advice of me."

XIII.

LIKE A LILY ON AN ALTAR

> "Roses, oh, how fair ye be!
> Ye are fading, dying!
> Ye should with my lady be,
> On her bosom lying." — *Goethe.*

WHEN Bryan Cross pushed his way through the great crowd at the cemetery after his address over Teenah Muller's grave, he was like a giant in conscious strength and power. It was evident to all who had witnessed his complete mastery of the people, and had shrunk from the burning rain of his attacks upon the selfishness of the age, that whatever chance he commanded the world to give him would be proffered instantly and with full measure. The wonder was where such a light had been hidden; how such a wizard had so long restrained his powers. The foremost lecture manager and his chief competitor were both at the Clock House early on Monday morning with offers which might have addled some men's heads, and when Bryan left the house he had the refusal of a tour which embraced all the cities of the first, second, and third rank on terms representing a modest fortune in a season.

We may as well pursue his career with a sweeping glance forward and say at once that what was promised was more than fulfilled. He prepared two lectures. The title of the leading one was " American Devils." " Mrs. John Smith's Thursdays " he prepared for second nights in large cities or return visits to smaller ones. Surrender to Self is a phrase which exactly describes the source of the evils he called " American Devils." From the text of " Mrs. Smith's Thursdays " he inveighed against those pretensions to superior rank which are made by an ever-widening mass and which turn from pretence to reality in their effect of ignoring the claims of the poor upon the sympathy of all whose common badge is the visiting card.

Before signing the agreement with the lyceum manager, he proceeded characteristically by laying the case before his sister. It would be profanation to visit her sick-chamber with him in any but a reverent spirit. It will be like seeing an Easter lily upon a snow-white altar to pause for a moment in her room. Everything there was snow-white — the walls, the enamelled furniture, the toilet and dressing stands, the shades and curtains, even the wasted face upon the snowy pillow above the immaculate counterpane. There was just the lily tone — the hint of ivory or cream — to set off her face against all else. Of white, also, but touched with gold, were a dainty desk and an upright piano, for within these walls Mabel Cross lived her whole life. So little of the sick-chamber was there about the room that its atmosphere held in suspense the faint pure odour of wood violets. A young Episcopal sister had been reading from the Bible when Bryan came. Instantly Mabel's face lighted up, a blush and a smile spread upon it. She threw out her arms, hid under dainty lawn and lace, and Bryan flew into them. She was slightly older than he, yet looked somewhat younger. To see her was to realise how it can be that the angels are never of any age and yet enjoy perpetual youth.

"I am just the same, dear Bryan," she said, in reply to his first question; "that is, I am very happy."

"But you," she added, holding him away at arm's length, to regard him the better, "you are so handsome, Bryan! What is the reason that every pretty girl does not fling herself at you? I would if I were one and were not already too vain of being merely your sister. And what are you trying to hide from me to-day? You look as Joshua must when he heard the Lord say that no man should be able to stand before him all the days of his life. I know what the world is talking about. Miss Jowett, here, has read to me columns upon columns about your addresses in the country. What a wonderful use God is making of you, Bryan! Oh, do thank Him enough and do not ever, for an instant, fancy the power is your own and not His exerted through you."

Bryan told her of the offer of the lecture agent, and that he had come to consult her before giving his answer.

"Splendid! splendid!" she cried, her pleasure dancing in her brilliant eyes as well as charging her voice. "You see now that your sister is something more than a mere bundle on a shelf. Oh, yes, I know that is what so big and strong a brother must have often thought of such a sister. Bundle, indeed! all the same, for years I have been prophesying this would come. And in your impatience you've been saying I was too hopeful and too fond of you. Now, see, it's all about to come true. Let us thank God, dear Bryan, for His goodness to you — and to me, for is not your success my happiness? Then you must promise never again to disparage my powers. Though I'm only a shopworn old bundle, I have sometimes an idea that I'm better fitted for prophecy than if I had more flesh and blood to think about. Joking apart, Bryan, I was thinking the other day I'd make a very good witch — in a picture."

"If there are *good* witches, I'm sure of it, Mabel."

"Bryan," she said, "I could not help regretting that there was not a word of religion in either of your addresses at Powellton. Were they well reported in the newspapers?"

"Verbatim, Mabel," said he, while his brow clouded.

"They teach only morality," said she. "Confucius did that, but what does it avail, without religion for its foundation?"

"I know, Mabel; but —" he was stammering over what he had to say; "you see —"

"Yes, I know that they were fearfully mixed crowds and one was an official occasion, but now that you are free to utter whatever is in your heart, you will not fail to emphasise the need of the Christian faith as a basis of the reforms you seek. There! How silly of me to criticise such a brilliant and courageous beginning. You will know how to turn it all to God's account. Let us thank Him, now, for the opportunity, dear brother, and then you shall tell me all your plans."

So we will leave them, she praying aloud in a voice like music melted by fervour, and he on his knees by her snowy bed.

Can it be that, as we turn away, we catch a glimpse of a guilty, shamefaced expression which he hides as he puts up his hands to cover his eyes?

With this invocation of a blessing on his tour, Bryan started upon the experiences of a lecturer, so varied and interesting at first, so wearying and monotonous in time. At first it was his wont to read the preliminary notices of the newspapers in each town, to look about for his lithographed portraits — even to walk past the lecture hall, soon after the doors opened, to see whether any one — or what number of persons — was going to hear him. But the mill-made notices soon palled, the portraits took on a deadly familiarity, and he became so certain of having to push his way through crowds at each hall entrance, when it came time for him to appear, that at last nothing of the first sensations endured. In their place came the fatigue of never-ending train catching, of unpleasant journeying and of broken nights abbreviated at both ends.

A joy that compensated him to the end was that of mastering his audiences, establishing a circuit between them and himself, and then, as it were, ordering them to laugh, to weep, or to thrill, or else to gasp when he sent home some unexpected, fearless, conscience-stabbing exposure of their folly.

He was everywhere successful beyond the hopes of his manager, and what is called "Society," which took him up as a new "sensation" when he attacked self-surrender, went the wilder over him for what he had to say in condemnation of those who pursue pleasure in dress and dining, in erotic fiction or in immodesty gilt-framed or palpitating beneath pink silk upon the stage.

There is a class of persons in each community, he found, whose aim is to hunt down every individual whose name has appeared in print half a dozen times, to entrap such in their homes, and to exhibit them to their friends. The tricks to which the autograph collectors descend are hardly more ingenious or more shameless than the wiles of these Lion Trappers whose successes entail a cruelty of which the Autograph Demons are guiltless. Self-respecting men and women who possessed this instinct of the showman often frankly invited Bryan to their houses "to meet the best people in the place," and he accepted or not, as he felt disposed. But when he tired of the unfair, one-sided game, and resolved, as he said, "to exhibit only in his cage," then the other, conscienceless folk ensnared him. They asked him to an "informal family dinner" here, or "a snug corner and a pipe" there, or else to "a quiet chat with a great admirer" somewhere else — always letting in the entire neighbourhood upon him when he was cornered, and forcing him to go through the familiar routine — so sickening to him and degrading to the others. Along came the woman loaded with "a thought" or a "burning question," the milk-eyed maidens with their effrontery materialised in the form of albums, the dressmakers' models who said they had "so longed to have the honour," but in reality were only desirous of getting their names into print as being "in it" once again. Sometimes Bryan also met the Enthusiast in Side Curls who had got a circle or a club (or would instantly get up one) for him to lecture to for nothing; and, always, there were a very few men present. One was paying the bills and looked puzzled. The others wondered how many dollars Bryan made — and sometimes asked him.

"They have actually taken up me and my lectures as a fad," he wailed in a letter to Laura. "Think how desperate the idlers must be for a fillip to their jaded senses when they run after one whose only purpose is to put them to shame. But only think how it belittles me — how they insult me! Before I resolved to make no appearance anywhere except in the lecture halls I was actually trapped into a 'Bryan Cross Lilac Tea' at the house of the wife of a college professor who, you may be sure, kept her plan from me, and made me believe I was only to meet her husband. After that, I absolutely withheld myself from everybody, and determined to at least appear too serious to be used as a fashionable plaything. I made my climaxes religious (deistically and eclectically, so as not to narrow my influence to any creed) and I added some very plain speech — almost too plain — about the tendencies of Fashionable Sensualism. This has set my later audiences quivering, but I fear that even this may be regarded simply as a 'sensation.' It seems of no use. The invitations roll in as plentifully as ever, and now I am besieged at each hotel and overwhelmed by fluttering frocks at the close of each lecture."

XIV.

THE HUNGER OF A LONESOME HEART

"It is not good that the woman should be alone." — *Old Testament, altered.*

IF, without each other's knowledge, we could enclose our souls or even a little of our sight and hearing, in our letters to our friends, what experiences we would have! The private scenes upon which our letters often intrude, the comments and conversations over the reading of them, all the phases of the intimacy of our missives in places where we must, at the most, content ourselves with a formal footing — what a broad new world these would create! True, our letters then might be as well considered and as infrequent as those of the old Japanese in their artistic heyday, who employed an artist to decorate a scroll, another to write the message upon it, and then another to fabricate a beautiful box of lacquer for its envelope — the same exquisite casket to which our ladies of the Occident have fallen heirs and now use for a glove box. But costly and important as letter writing would then become, perhaps we should say as the Irish sailor did when he was being sewn up in a shotted sack for having scaled the walls of a Turkish harem: “It’s a bother — but ’twas worth it.”

This written wail of Bryan’s, for instance, condemning Fashion upon new counts, came to Laura in the heat of preparation for the greatest social triumph of her life. She was, indeed, so busy with Pleasure that she did not notice the irony of the coincidence. Mechanics were setting up two ornamental fountains in the flower-beds that flanked the ends of the Clock House. Electricians were hanging glass bulbs, as fruit would grow, upon the largest trees that skirted the further side of the main lawn before the mansion. Carpenters were girdling the giant elm at the lawn’s end with a music gallery — to cover which with gay cloth other workmen were in waiting. At the edge of the broad gravelled drive others were setting up a mast upon which was to be hung an arc-light. And in an opening among the trees a red and white marquee, for use as a performers’ retiring room, was already up and lend-ing its colour to the scene. Two great cases of china, glass, and plate from a caterer's had been set down by the servants' door in the back, and the caterer's agent was standing by them, watch in hand, despairing of the coming of his cooks and waiters, but determined that, at least, the heavy cases which had arrived should not now escape.

Still other workmen were covering the stairs and passages with crash, and Laura's own servants, under her eye as she stood on the lawn, were decorating the monotonous brick wall of the mansion by hanging from each window a Persian rug patterned in red, yellow, and black. Her plan was that three of the four sides of the garden, already illuminated on two sides by the marquee and the band gallery, should vie with one another in colour.

"You're showing too much of the rugs, Miss Johnson," Laura called to the housekeeper, who was at one of the windows. "Measure the height of half the window, from the sill to the upper sash, and then hang exactly that length of each rug from each window. I am certain that will look well, but be sure to call me when one line is finished."

"Vanity, vanity and vexation of spirit," said some one behind her back. "A tithe of this expense — a tiny fraction of the time and energy thus wasted on frivolity — think what it would mean if expended in charity and good works."

It was York Stone who had come unheeded upon the lawn. Laura turned upon him swiftly, and, tossing her head with a gesture of spirited defiance, prepared to defend herself. He met her eyes with a grave expression.

"Good-morning, Mr. Stone," said she. "If you are going to find fault, too, then I know I must be doing wrong, but I can't feel it, I cannot believe it; and I sometimes think if every serious friend turns upon me and pursues me with reproaches for what I still feel innocent in doing, I shall — I shall persist in my fault and — and I sha'n't care any more."

"Tinsel, bunting, music, wine, the short-lived sparkle of bright eyes, the froth of human wit; oh-h-h" — here a long groan; "oh-h-h, Miss Lamont, what things are these for thee to live for?"

"Are you in earnest or are you teasing me?"

"Ha! ha! ha! ha!" the young rector roared, and then again, "ha! ha! ha!" in a fit of loud laughter. "In earnest," said he, "ay, Miss Lamont, these are tears which you mistake for laughter. Excuse my grief. Would any man laugh to see a young lady misspend her life? Would Mr. Paton laugh? Would Mr. Cross? The hanging gardens of Babylon, suggested by that fiddlers' gallery; the gaudy drapery at each window recalling the Oriental splendour of Byzantium; this pole, reminiscent of the favourite ornaments of the cruel doges; the fountains, symbolising the waste of every era since Solomon; the loops of light suggesting Nero's fearful means of turning night into day; oh-h-h-h, Sister Lamont — ha! ha! ha!" And off his spirits went in a fit of laughter.

"You don't think it's wickedness, then?"

"Well," said the man of piety and of high spirits, "to tell the truth, I've a considerable doubt whether you have any original sin left in you, and, where there is so much wickedness without doubt, I think we ought to be too busy to bother with that of which we are not at all certain."

"I received attentions and courtesies from a great many persons in town last winter," Laura remarked; "and I was not able to return them there, so I thought I would give a rather elaborate entertainment to all my best friends and acquaintances before the weather grows too cool for me to utilise my garden as well as my house."

"You've hired the whole hotel for your overflow, they say, and refurnished the bedrooms."

"Do people say that?" Laura inquired. "It isn't true. I have taken the bedrooms for to-morrow night — there are only eight — and in two that were very shabby I have put some cottage furniture which I mean to give afterwards to a servant who is to be married next month. I'm going to send the bachelors to the hotel and entertain the ladies and married people here in the house. It all looks very pretentious, but I hoped it only seemed so to me because I am managing it. My guests cannot be aware of half the trouble I've been to. And as a mere polite effort to meet my obligations it seems as little as I can do."

"I only wish they could know how far from frivolous you are," the clergyman said. "Oh, I know that you do not wish your work known, and I honour you for the feeling, but, all the same, it is a pity that such an example to others should be lost. I have come in answer to your letter; can we talk of your work out here?"

"Better go in the library, I think," she answered, and led the way into the house. "I'll call mother. She does not know that you are here."

When Mrs. Lamont came down to join Mr. Stone and her daughter in the library, she gave him a look which (had he known as much as we) he would have interpreted to mean "be kind to her." That was the elder lady's spoken or signalled injunction to every gentleman caller, among all of whom, she could foresee, there must eventually be one to prove himself the man of destiny.

"I have done as you suggested," said Mr. Stone. "The second year is ending and we can look forwards and backwards — backwards upon a promising growth in values and returns, I am happy to say, and forwards with good hopes. The five-acre lot at Wapata has —"

But there is no intention here to enter with them upon their discussion of the profits and losses — mainly the latter — and the hopes and plans of this warm-hearted, open-handed fair philanthropist and her man of affairs, so singularly chosen (or elected by himself) from among the clergy.

Rather let us merely catch at the end of the dialogue, since that does not tend to lead us from the main theme — the heart wanderings and the social adventures of this maiden millionaire.

"I shall deserve your praise," Miss Lamont was saying, "when I can feel that I am doing all that I am conscious is demanded of me, and that will only be when I buy out the tavern in the village, and manage it or have it managed in concert with our plans. Its barroom is the greatest obstacle to the complete happiness of my tenants and neighbours, and to our entire success in helping them. Properly managed, for the sale of only wines and beer, of the purest make, and by some one who will not sell to drunkards or children, or keep the place open beyond the legal hours, it would not harm my people or hinder my work."

"You must never dream of managing a barroom," Mr. Stone replied. "The idea of a young lady in such a relation to the public is too startling for people to view it correctly. I could do it — that is, I should hope to be able to obtain permission from my bishop — "

"You — a clergyman!" Laura exclaimed; "you must not even speak of it."

"And yet a dozen or more clergymen, aware that prohibition has proven worse than a failure, already manage such resorts in England. To do good — to lessen the sum of evil in the world — that is a clergyman's duty."

"Oh, I know," she replied — showing by her tone that she did not know; "but you have to consider your church and brothers of the clergy, while I am alone; I have no one, nothing to hinder. Clearly, I am the one to do it. How often we talk about it in just this way. We always talk 'round in a circle and come to no conclusion. I do not want to do it, but it must be done, and I am the one to undertake it."

"My dear Miss Lamont," said the handsome young rector, pausing to take both her hands in his own. "My dear Miss Lamont, you have your sex, your position, your maidenhood to regard."

"Then I wish I were a man, a worker, and the head of a family," said she. But she was not thinking of what she said. On the contrary, she was leaving her hands in his another second or two on purpose to discover whether by any chance he would invest his grasp with even the slightest sign of what she would have called "a human feeling." She waited and watched for a betrayal of personal feeling, a tiny liberty, or even a slight relaxing and tightening of his hold upon her. She was disappointed. She drew her hands away, almost with a sigh.

"It's becoming rather a hackneyed saying with me," Mr. Stone remarked, "but I'll repeat it — I think you are a very wonderful woman."

"And you are a singular man," she said to herself, as she heard the door close behind him. Having merely recorded this thought, she was ashamed and blushed as if some one might have heard it and divined the impulse which prompted it.

She walked to the table and collected her books and papers, but her mind clung to its sensation — so unmaidenlike, so almost immodest.

"I don't care," she said to herself, "he *is* singular. And so is Cousin Archie; and I am sure that it is just as well they are; though, as for Mr. Stone, I really do think him strong and manly. I lean upon him. And so is Mr. Beekman singular" — but at the mere mention of the name of this cavalier, who was more distant than either of the others in his manner, her blushes came again. And this time they felt scorching hot upon her cheeks.

XV.

CUPID BUNGLES A LITTLE

> **" Then the fiddling and fifing and strumming begin —**
> **Such whirling and twirling and skirling and din."**
> **— *Goethe.***

ON her night of nights — when Miss Lamont gave her grand party, the great dial in the tower, from which the " Clock House " got its name, looked down upon a score of women in faultless costume and with such grace and colours as vied with the most brilliant charms of the garden; upon another score of men full of the strong calm dignity of its trees. At times all glided with the music as lightly as it floated through the air, and, for an hour, a dozen guests recited the mirthful lines of a comedietta by Archie Paton, not too suggestive of Boccaccio — yet full of the charm and colour of his scene-settings and blending with the surroundings of verdure, sky, luxury, false lights, and the merry spirit of a holiday.

Later, the scene was shifted to the great dining-hall, where the women's eyes flashed back the brilliant banquet-jets and their lips and cheeks and showy dresses echoed the glory of the flowers upon the walls and table; where the men expressed by easy attitudes and witty speech the confidence which marks men as the gods of earth. After the supper and its bubbling cheer, a half a dozen of the ladies and a gentleman or two appeared in a semi-ballet and semi-operetta called "The Loves of the Flowers," written and put into music by two members of the Boozers. There were ballads by the ladies, Miss Lamont herself singing two or three Italian love-songs. Mr. Courtlandt Beekman told the beautiful story of a Chinese drama. Hours were spent in these ways between dinner and midnight-supper, but no one heeded them at the time or ever ceased to wish for their return afterward.

York Stone had promised to attend, but was kept away by the serious illness of the wife of a labourer, "a Romanist," he waggishly wrote, "yet as human, apparently, as if she were of the Episcopalian elect." Archie Paton was among the guests, though he fell into disfavour with the other ladies by decoying the men into the library where the strong waters and cigars were set out for them. Two or three times deputations of pretty women went to the library to complain that they were abandoned by their cavaliers, and each time they reported that Archie was the Yorick who was "setting the table in a roar" and proving a stronger magnet than their fair selves. But Archie was very attentive to Mrs. Lamont at times, and eventually regained in part the ground he had lost with his young cousin by saying that he would stay a week if he might, as his new book was "flowing like a bursted reservoir" and he felt that he could perform wonders away from the distractions of town.

This was before she had enjoyed a delightful half-hour of marked attention from Courtlandt Beekman. It is doubtful whether after that great joy she would have beamed such warm thanks and evident delight upon her cousin as she vouchsafed to him when he intruded himself in the midst of her concern over what seemed the studied neglect of Mr. Beekman.

Courtlandt had been polite to her, yet no more so than to every other woman at the party. And as she watched him and weighed his manner toward her she grew wretchedly jealous and envious of the others. For again, he was the king among the men, the master among the women. No man there compared with him in looks or build or in the proud yet easy habit of command that was his as if by birth. Not one other in that company, of either sex, possessed such grace of movement or such genius in tact and in a form of wit that was always brilliant and never unkind.

Suddenly he came to her side, and said that he had been waiting a long while to see her by herself and to thank her for remembering him.

" For though you made a deep impression upon me at the club in New York," he said, " I had no reason to suppose that I would be remembered by you."

" You forget," Laura replied, " that you predicted that you were some day to know me very well."

" Better than I know, or ever knew, man or woman on earth!" Courtlandt answered, repeating his very words at the interview she had recalled to mind. " I feel that to be so true that I am impatient at this meeting and shall be — I fear — at any that does not fulfil the alluring prospect I saw before my mental sight when I first spoke those words to you. Do not think me presumptuous — the prospect was only of a chance — more than one chance — to be of slight service to you. Naturally, I inferred that if I ever were so fortunate as to serve you we must by that means come to know one another."

"And do you remember that I said you were uncanny?" Laura asked. She meant only to avoid replying to his peculiar promise of future intimacy, but, the moment she had thus spoken, the rudeness of such a slighting reply to so manly a promise of service struck her, and she burned with shame.

"Oh, forgive me, Mr. Beekman," said she, "I did not mean that in the way it sounded. I only meant — I really only — "

"But I see no reason for an apology," he answered. "That reminds me, by the way, that, if I should not apologise for airing a trifling power I possess, I should at least explain it. I do not want to appear either uncanny or vain."

He then told her that his occasional ability to foresee events which were about to happen, and his seeming divination of the thoughts and impulses of others, was very limited in its scope, and was in some degree possessed by millions of men and women. It came, he thought, of schooling one's mind to thinking away from one's self, of reflection, and of being much in solitude or with men whose language he could not speak. He had seen the power developed in a Buddhist priest in Japan to such proportions as to be really awesome. On the day that the Empress Elizabeth of Austria was murdered, this priest, in his cottage in Japan, told him that "a Western queen had been shot."

"Could I project my mind as far as that," Beekman said, "or could I develop a mentality so sensitive to the most distant influences, I might seriously vaunt my powers. As it is, I only stumble a little more frequently than most other persons upon revelations which might very generally, I think, have been gained by mere intense observation of the Sherlock Holmes order. Indeed, my solitary journeys and long experiences among peoples of strange speech and more strange customs have so developed my powers of observation that perhaps all my apparently mysterious inklings may be only feats of watchfulness and study of my surroundings."

"That would not account for your saying what you did to me," she suggested.

He looked into her eyes for a second, was about to speak, then checked himself and laughed merrily.

"No," said he, "what I said of my one day knowing you was of your doing rather than mine. You said it to me first — or hinted it — though you may not have been conscious of it."

"I? Why, what do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean a very trite, ordinary thing indeed," he said, again looking inquiringly into her face. "It is something I cannot tell you if you do not know it, yet it is as commonplace and as old — as old as — the human race itself."

"I wish you would tell me. It is not nice to laugh and not explain."

"You are right," he said; "quite right. I mean, then, that when I first saw you I read in your eyes that we might be friends if we would; that we were not repellent forces — perhaps that is all I read; or, perhaps, it meant more than that. You must know how much I read."

" But you said it when you were blindfolded and only heard me speak."

" Did I? Why, yes," he added, loving to tease her and to play close to the edge of an unwarranted delicate declaration, " then it must have been your voice which made me dare presume that, in years to come, we shall know one another better — as friends, you know — and so think of each other, I hope, to the end of our days."

Thus they parted. That he teased her is certain, but that she missed the true import of his carefully chosen words is by no means so positive. If it was impossible for him to declare his true feeling, it was no less impossible for her to pretend to divine it. As she thought of the conversation afterward, it seemed to her that his voice imparted more than his words. How long and fondly did she recall the tender tones with which he had clothed his guarded words.

In the morning, after all but her cousin had gone, the happy girl opened her eyes amid her dainty laces, upon the many exquisite appointments of her beautiful bedchamber, and felt her heart swell and her breath quicken as she recalled this interview with the hero of her gathering. In time she recalled that her cousin, Archie Paton, was now her guest, and she began to plan such loving hospitality for him as she would have liked to bestow upon Beekman. Thus it is with affectionate women. They will often heap the kindness they feel for an absent one upon the first object at hand, loving to do their utmost for the mere relief of expending the kindliness begotten in their joy. Thus it came about that Laura bestowed her gigantic all upon Archie.

She arose early to make sure of being about when he got up. She breakfasted quickly, and then waited for the first sign of his stirring, which being given, she fluttered to the kitchen door to discuss with the cook what could be done to make his breakfast notable. The fruit for the table was carefully selected, the newsdealer was prodded to deliver the papers half an hour earlier, all the principal dailies were taken and spread out upon a side table, and when, at last, the pampered guest appeared, Miss Laura lurked in the passage and inspected everything that went to him. Thus she made certain that the toast was crisp and properly buttered, that the cream was sweet, the coffee was correctly made, and that every dish was perfect. While he sat in solemn grandeur she waited, now in the drawing-room, now in the garden, seeing to it in the meantime, that the library, which was set apart as his workroom, was made as fit as she would have had it for a king, with flowers on the side table and mantelpiece, a fire in the grate, and everything in excellent order. Her mother and the servants were positive that marriage was in the air. We, who know more, are equally certain that the young lady was demonstrating, in the way in which she gave up these days to him, just how, when the time came, she would surrender the remainder of her life to the man of her ultimate choice.

When Archie emerged, surfeited with good fare and screwed up to the proper nervous tension by the faked or exaggerated horrors of the morning press, Laura was nowhere to be found. Every servant said he or she had just seen her, but none could find her without a great deal of going up and down stairs and in and out of side doors. Such was her — I had almost said art, but I mean such was her sex.

Being found, she came eagerly, wreathed in smiles and as filled with solicitude as to how he felt and had slept and breakfasted as a sea-shell is of sound. But when he proposed a drive or a tour of the garden or a chat, she found many seeming obstacles arising from her morning duties, all of which vanished at the point at which they were likely to appear serious. Therefore she always did what he suggested, and, at first, he linked a hand or a little finger with hers, and was very attentive and happy — and loud of pretence that she was putting his work out of mind further than all the distractions of town could have driven it.

This phase lasted two days, and on each night he read the opening chapters of his novel to her, disclosing a heroine in high life with no parents, but possessing a Madison Avenue house, another at Cos Cob, and millions upon millions of dollars. He had not yet considered how he should set about it, but he was going to compel her to be actively useful; in maintaining a rendezvous for the poor, he thought. There they could obtain advice, medicines, and afternoon tea, or leave their children with nurses and toys, hear lectures and enjoy the elevating company of a sisterhood of shabby-genteel ladies that she would found. There, also, they could obtain work and sell worsted stockings, "or whatever poor folks make," he said, "to while away their leisure hours."

Laura was greatly disappointed. She had been prepared to have this novel revolutionise her life. Reluctantly she admitted to herself that Archie had not advanced beyond the commonest errors of his time in his views of the needs of the poor. She abandoned hope of guidance from him, and began to realise more than she ever had before how practical and sagacious were her own endeavours. She determined to ask Mr. Stone to think out with her some entirely new scheme for Archie's heroine. Her modesty forbade her to make her own work known to him. But, in the meantime, Archie had tired of reading his novel, had ceased to twine fingers with her on long walks, and was too evidently becoming bored. On the fourth day occurred the momentous meeting with Mr. Stone. Alas! Archie treated him coldly. To all intents and purposes, he declined to discuss practical matters with him because he was a clergyman and therefore could not comprehend worldly affairs in any but a visionary and sentimental light. Laura afterward chided him with having been rude to her friend, but he was unrepentant.

"My dear cousin," he said, "parsons are anachronisms. They come in somewhere between the ichthyosaurus and the dodo. They have survived because your sex perceives their helplessness, and they work your sex's sentimentality as if it were a piano. Of this particular man's church it is said that it interferes less with business and religion than any other, and he will probably tell you that most of the other churches are societies for the holding of religious mass meetings. Once upon a time I had, simultaneously, a coloured valet and a pair of lavender trousers. It was a foregone conclusion that they would gravitate together with violence in time, and they did so at the end of a year. When I chided Sam for unblushingly wearing the garment in my presence, he replied: 'Marse Archie, I done been 'shamed for to see you wearing dose pants. 'Pears like you dunno dat ev'yboddy's sayin' dat dey don't fit you nowheres.' Well, cousin, those lavender trousers and I are like the poor and the priests. The world has left one to manage the other for centuries, and, as it is evident that the priests don't fit the problem 'nowheres,' it is time that practical men stepped in and took the problem out of their hands."

Laura felt it on the tip of her tongue to say that Mr. Stone was sufficiently practical to have been in the winning crew and the football team in Yale only five or six years ago, and that, since then, he had in all probability been intimate with the daily concerns of more hard-working folk than most men. But she was so hurt by her cousin's egotism, rudeness, and irreverent attitude toward religion that she merely responded with a forced smile. At breakfast next morning, he got a round-robin from his friends in the Madison Club, saying that he must come and play one or two games in a billiard tourney which he had too hastily concluded that he had won, or be prepared to see the palm go to a rival. He sped to town and returned the next morning, but on the following night he went again to the city, and this time wired to his cousin to send on his things as "pressing business unexpectedly detained him."

At the club that night he said to his nearest friend: "I am like the Irishman who came out of the hospital saying that he had lost four weeks of his life saving the rest of it. I only lost four days to keep a promise to a charming cousin. If I had promised a month's visit, I'd have set fire to the house to get out of it."

Before the huge octopus of marble fastened its last heart-chilling tentacle around him, and drew him in to sink supinely on the soft leather cushions in its maw, he wrote a sugar-and-water (the first ingredient was indubitably sugar) note to Laura and fancied that it would satisfy her.

Her incessant energy gave her plenty of thoughts to dull the edge of her disappointment with Archie. For one thing, the gay season was opening in New York, and she was being invited here and there, to this dance, that theatre party, this musicale, or other gay affairs. During the previous winter she had spent her nights in town, part of the time in a hotel and part of the time in a flat, but this winter she had an opportunity to achieve the ideal thing in the way of temporary quarters in town, by obtaining excellent accommodations, and paying for them with money which would help a young girl to support herself. This was a beautiful Canadienne who had come to town with her mother to seek her fortune, and had been driven as a last resort to try posing for artists. In a fortunate hour she had applied to Delafield Wright, Laura's friend, and the celebrated painter. He utilised her as a draped model in his best work of the year, and paid her as a prince might have done, but earnestly advised her to allow him and his friends to establish her as mistress of a boarding-house. All the men and women of the Beaux Arts Club worked with a will to start the two ladies in a fashionable neighbourhood, not because there was anything degrading in the life of a model — especially as such a woman would follow it — but because she and her mother were manifestly of a quality to make it pitiful for the younger woman to seek work of the sort.

So the weeks wore on and established Laura in her place in the pleasure life of the capital. They settled her in her more than occasional quarters at the Canadiennes'. They busied her at times in her new venture in supplying a large communal greenhouse to her poor associates in the flower industry, and her older one of entertaining these humble partners at the Clock House, now and then, and visiting them in their own homes between whiles.

Her serious occupations threw her more frequently than ever in the company of Mr. Stone. She became aware of how much she relied upon his assistance, and acknowledged to herself that he was the healthiest and most evenly balanced, most unselfish character in her narrow ken. After discovering that she leaned upon him, she began to study him as she had never done before. She tried to discover what was unsatisfactory in their relations, for she was conscious that there was something about him which disappointed her. His nice sense of honour, his robust adherence to principle, his way of ranking his duties to the poor above his appointments with her — did these irritate as well as awe her? She used to hear with interest of his part in the sports of the village youths, rich and poor, and now — why should she now have to struggle to regard them with the same degree of approval? It had always been a matter of pride with her that York Stone treated her with marked and formal respect. Was she piqued because he did not venture farther? Could this be the case, now that she suspected Courtlandt Beekman of a love for her that gave her a pride beyond all her earlier dreaming? Remember how affectionate was her nature. Remember how wholly without a true, close friend the poor girl was. Remember, too, how most of us, of both sexes, love to feel ourselves admired. Admired? Why is not "beloved" the better word?

"You were glad of an excuse not to come to the party I gave to my city friends," she said to the rector one day.

"I fully intended to come," he replied, "but a serious case of sickness kept me away."

"You have taken the utmost interest in my work among the people," she continued, "but the other side of my life, the lighter side, — you never show even friendly interest in that."

"You have adopted my plans in your philanthropic work," he replied, "and I am very anxious to see them given a fair trial. When you first came here and I heard of your giving away money, right and left, I was alarmed. I thought you might undo all my work. I'll confess to you that I lay in wait for you and followed you several days until at last I cornered you at Barbara Wildey's. You don't mind my telling you, now? I'm thankful I spoke as I did to you, frankly and under the strain of my fears, because I startled you into thinking for yourself, and from that day it has been you who have taken the lead, and I have been only a left hand to you in our way of inciting the poor to rise by their own efforts."

"But my pleasures, which expose me to so much criticism; you never speak of them."

"I do not know your friends, Miss Lamont."

"Oh," she exclaimed, in her impatience, "how guarded you are. I believe if you saw me doing wrong you would not reprove me."

"I hope I should not forget myself to that extent," Stone said, in a manner maddeningly calm.

"Suppose I asked you to do so, what then?"

"Even then," he said, "it would be presumptuous of me to advise one who is so naturally good. Even you might have unworthy friends, but you would not keep them longer than it took to find out their unworthiness."

"But as to 'society' in general; is it an evil? what we call 'society,' fashionable life, I mean? Is its influence widening so as to harden the hearts of most of those who should and could help the poor? Are all who use visiting cards, and all who do not, being arrayed against each other in hostile camps?"

"I don't know," Stone replied. "The spirit of the age is one of idolatry of money, and such minor phases as Bryan Cross is attacking may be offshoots of the prime evil, but, as I say, I don't know. I am a stranger to fashionable life, and it has hardly a footing in my parish. I give up my whole life to my work, but I am not so narrow as to condemn others who set apart some of their time for pleasure. It seems to me that the pleasures of well-bred people of leisure can all be bad if they give up their whole lives to them. A very little wicked pleasure is bad, and too much innocent pleasure crowds out its own innocence if it is carried so far as to require the most of our time and thought. But, there — this does not apply to you. If I were to presume upon my acquaintance with you, Miss Lamont, it could only be to tell you how good and noble

I think you, and how I have been strengthened and inspired by knowing you."

He was taking up his hat when he said this, and preparing to go.

"Oh, by the way," he added, "just before you came in, a servant laid down those two cards. Now, there are two young ladies who move on the edge and occasionally over the borders of the richest and most exclusive society in America — the Misses Van Ness. When you have known them well you will be able to judge whether the tendencies of a professionally fashionable life are such as Mr. Cross depicts them or not. Remember, though, that you may need to tone down the picture these young ladies present, for it is gossiped that few others paint the lily, Fashion, with as high colours as these distinguished sisters."

Laura took the cards, and, once by herself, sank upon a sofa and read them over and over again.

"The Misses Van Ness!" she exclaimed; "the aristocratic Van Ness girls! Henrietta, who was engaged to Cornelius Kip and then to young Herbert Lounsbury; Lily, the younger sister. Well, of all the unexpecteds, this is the unexpectedest!"

XVI.

LAURA MEETS THE VAN NESS SISTERS

> **"But your face**
> **Hath honour in it — and what have I to do,**
> **What should I do with honour?"** — ***Goethe.***

THE Misses Van Ness were at home when Laura repaid their call. It surprised her to find that their house in Fishkill was one that she had often seen and imagined to be deserted. It was a large frame dwelling of the "Mansard" period in our country — the early seventies — when an epidemic of frame houses with bow windows and gingerbread fronts, each capped by a top story of slate, disfigured the prettiest of our Eastern towns. This particular house had come down in the world by change of condition as well as of fashion. It was beginning to whimper for a new suit of paint, and its grounds almost cried for the care of a gardener. Few New Yorkers would have been surprised to find the Van Nesses in such a house, because all the gossip about these noted sisters who "painted the lily Fashion in high colours" suggested that they had been able to make both ends meet somewhat at the cost of their pride. Gossip, particularly such as victimises unmarried ladies, has not a nice flavour in genteel nostrils, but here was a case where gossip was all but public and gave two young women a continental notoriety. Thousands who never saw the Van Nesses had heard that the father, "Larry" Van Ness, spent upon himself nearly all of the little he had not squandered, that Cornelius Kip supported the family by loans to the mother while he was engaged to Henrietta, and that Henrietta delayed the wedding for years in the hope of making a better match. The same public believed that Henrietta lost a second suitor, young Herbert Lounsbury, by boldly defending her course with the first. There may have been very little truth in all this, yet it was common gossip about town.

"The little fool," people reported Henrietta as saying, when Lounsbury questioned her about her earlier flame; "he calls himself 'Cornelius Kip the Tenth,' but his only real distinction is the outcry he has made about his loans to mother. Everybody guyed him till I took him up and assured my friends that he wasn't such a fool as he seemed. He paid for what he got, but why shouldn't he? He had money and nothing else, and we had everything else and no money."

The "everything else" which these sisters boasted was whatever came of their sister being the Princesse de Grilliac of non-aromatic repute, but a rampant figure in fashionable sporting life in England. Her legitimate resources would have seemed to require her to live as the ravens do, yet she cut a brilliant figure, and gossip rang around her. However, of all this, as of most of such things, Laura knew very little. Of the Van Nesses she only knew that they figured somewhere near the top of the gilded social pinnacle, and she innocently supposed that this fact reflected credit upon the ultra-fashionables, since the Van Nesses were not rich. She did not realise that the most exclusive fashionable circle has a fringe, frayed in places and soiled in spots, yet suffered to cling to it by the force of old or high connections or the ability to amuse or serve it in manifold ways.

"So glad," said Henrietta, as she strode into the faded drawing-room to meet Laura.

The odour of cigarettes clung to her clothing.

"Charmed, I'm sure," said Lily, pronouncing the first word as if it were spelled "chawmed."

With her the aroma of smoking was even stronger.

"Maddening to have missed you the other day," Henrietta declared.

"Especially as we had to borrow Harry Kimball's carriage to drive over. It's beastly to be so rotten poor, but it has its compensations — for our friends," Lily continued; "when one has to borrow a carriage in order to make a call, it's more of a compliment than it used to be when we were obliged to go out if only to keep the horses fit."

Very affectedly mannish in dress and more so in speech were both these sisters. Henrietta showed, at thirty-five, that she had been fine looking, and so she was still, except that what was left of her beauty had become rather a work of art than of nature. Her complexion had little other merit than that it was the best she could buy, while underneath it were seen the tautened skin and pulling lines which come of burning life's candle at both ends. The light in her eyes was cold, and those women who disliked her said that she looked fast and hard. She was tall and vigorous, with a proud carriage, and many persons thought her style of dress a very attractive imitation of masculine attire. Plain tight skirts, fancy waistcoats and loose jackets, an Alpine hat in winter and a straw sailor hat in summer, with masculine ties, studs, cuff buttons, and a fob, this was the costume she affected. Her favourite colours were dark blue or pearl grey, and the material cloth, always. As for my opinion of her looks: sixteen years of the strain of gay life will leave some marks, especially when it is doubled by insufficient means and the hostility of an entire sex; for it was a little circle of mesmerised male admirers that clung to Henrietta, as she did to them. She had their tastes and expressed herself in their vernacular when she was with them, on their yachts, in their after-dinner relaxations, among their horses and dogs, or wherever she found herself.

Wherever we find a woman too careless in her speech we will discover that her male associates are even more careless in her presence. Too much of the sudden new fault of impropriety of speech in woman reflects upon the men. And yet on the other hand it is true that men are what women permit them to be.

Lily, the younger sister, was what the other women called "baby pretty," a short, round-bodied, plump-faced woman of thirty-two, who was at war with her surroundings, and would not cover their nudities with even a polite pretence of concealment.

"We were most disappointed at not seeing your house," Lily said to Laura. "We tried to get your man to say that you would soon return, so that we could go in and have a look around. It wasn't mere curiosity — not on Henrietta's part, for she has designs on you. When you know us better, you'll run up against that little trait of ours, of never doing anything without a card up our sleeves. I'm not a match for Henrietta at it, because — hang it! I'm rather tired of the whole game. You'll find that out, too."

"What a fearfully smart thing your garden party must have been," Henrietta remarked. "How awfully clever to think of giving it at night. It must have cost a lot. We read yards about it in the *Herald.*"

"And heard miles about it in the village shops," said kittenish Lily. "You unjointed the nose of every woman who worships a black silk gown, kept in her wardrobe like a god in its niche — and of every maiden who sports a diary for the sake of writing 'George called,' 'George didn't come; I wonder why,' over and over again. They *are* slanging you for snubbing them."

"Oh, I hope not," Laura exclaimed; "I — "

"Don't pay the slightest attention to Lily," the elder sister remonstrated. "We're the only jealous ones. I'm burning to know the people you do, Miss Lamont. They must be ravishingly interesting — all those authors and painters and architects you had down here; but it's just as it was when Lord Coleridge made that delicious break at Mrs. Lenox-Hill's about the same sort of people. Don't you know? It ought to have a pension for old age by this time, but I'll tell it."

"It was Joseph's telling it that enraged Potiphar's wife," said Lily.

"At any rate," Henrietta went on, "Lord Coleridge was over here, and was being dined and danced and danced and dined till his noble digestion went wrong and his head reeled with seeing so much waltzing. 'It seems to be all dining and dancing in your smart set over here,' said he to Mrs. Lenox Hill; 'tell me, when am I going to get a chance to see your famous poets and historians and explorers and generals?' 'Oh, really, your lordship,' she had to say, 'none of those people are in our set.'"

"Don't you think that was her 'break,' as you call it — more than his?" Laura asked.

"Oh, la la!" Lily screamed; "Henrietta, I 'heard the bell ring,' as Harry says, when that shot struck."

"Whosever break it was," the elder sister said, "I'd like to know the people Miss Lamont had down here. They're not in it over here, as they are everywhere abroad — and it makes our best set rather stupid, I must say."

"Rotten stupid," Lily remarked; "if I knew you better, Miss Lamont, I'd say 'damned stupid.'

"If you're going to tell tales out of school," Lily continued, "why don't you tell about old Wetherlee and that Madame Castella who came up in Corneil Stuyvesant's wake with his Creole bride; her grandmother, I mean."

"Why, Lily!" Henrietta exclaimed. "You know something that I don't. I did not think so meanly of you."

"Pitch into Harry, not me, Henrietta. He told me this at the Stuyvesants' the other night. Madame, the Creole grandmamma, was holding forth about the great departed Beauregard — who was a little tin god in Creoledom, you know — and she used the expression that ''e was a man of 'onah, sah, and of ze 'ighest principle and piety, sah,' and all that. Old Tom Wetherlee — the father, you know; who owns whatever Trinity Church and the Astors don't own — suddenly broke in on her. 'God bless me, madame!' he roared (you know that sax-horn voice of his) 'you New Orleans people are very unconventional. I've been a listener in the drawing-rooms of New York since I was a boy, and not for thirty years have I heard the words "honour and principle and piety" spoken in one of them.' There, Henrietta, Harry told me that. If you can't absorb the little he knows in all the time you have him to yourself, you mustn't blame me."

"Oh, he's a good boy," said Henrietta; "there was nothing *risque* in it or he would have told it to me long ago."

" Harry, of whom we speak," Lily continued, addressing Laura, " is Harry Kimball, who was almost lynched — "

" Lily! Look out," her elder sister commanded. " That Bryan Cross was stopping with Miss Lamont, you know."

" Well, of course, I know," Lily replied, " but I believe in clearing things up if we're going to know one another. Harry Kimball is Henrietta's Number Three, Miss Lamont — her lucky number, she thinks."

" Really! " Laura exclaimed. " Well, of course, I cannot blame you for thinking what you must of Mr. Cross, if you are satisfied that he made so terrible a mistake in that case."

" Oh, I don't care anything about it," Henrietta replied. " I've had to row with Harry to keep him from airing it when he's with me. I told him he might survive the loss of his morals, but that I couldn't stand a man with no tact. To seek adventures among vulgar people was bound to lead to a public row, and he's learned his lesson, I think, but I draw the line at his digging up the thing in my presence. Men will be men, Miss Lamont. They are divided into two classes — the found-out and the not-found-out."

"I'm sorry to hear you say that," Laura remarked. "I cannot believe you really think it. If it were true that men were all wicked, then our sex would have only itself to defend it. Were a man of my acquaintance under such suspicion, I, too, should want to hear very little about it, yet that little I should demand."

"Repentance, I suppose you mean," said Henrietta, with contempt in her tone.

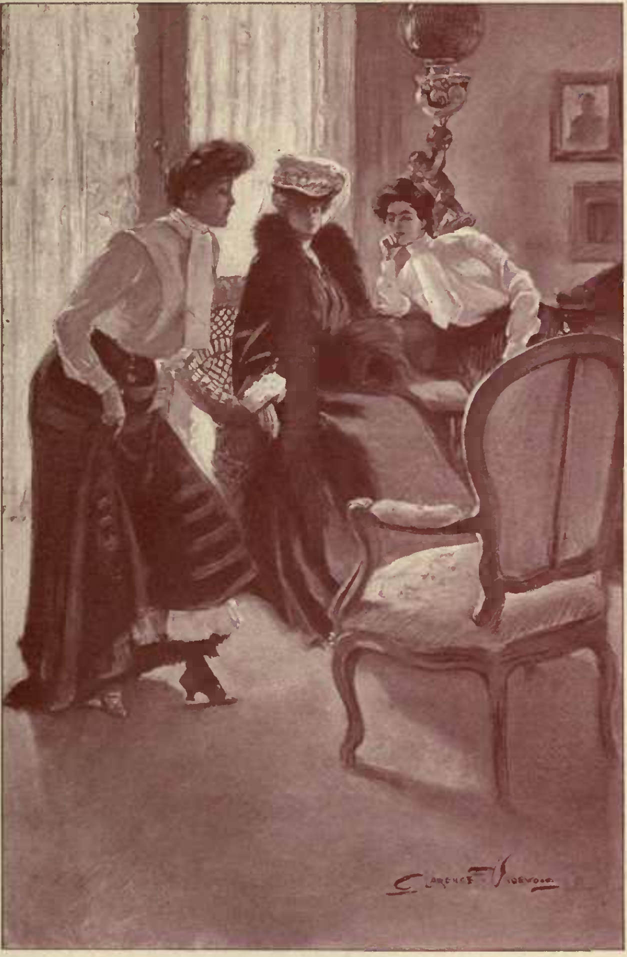
"No," Laura said, "but a positive denial of the charge."

"I'm quite sure you must be right, but — "

"But," purred Lily, with the expectant look of a cat that watches a canary.

"You live in a different atmosphere, Miss Lamont," Henrietta remarked. "Perhaps it's merely idle men, such as are the only kind I have ever had much to do with, who deserve my opinion of them."

"Why put it all on the men?" Lily broke in. "Whatever they do in those ways requires the help of the women. It is all cant and rot to say that a woman has to be sacrificed every time


Clarence F. Underwood

"HERE SHE LIFTED A FOOT AND SLOWLY MOVED IT FAR FORWARD"

a man cuts up. I have noticed that the women who make such a deuce of a row when they are caught are often open to a suspicion of having an ulterior purpose. What I mean is that when the man and woman are on an equal footing the woman makes no fuss, and no one cries out in her behalf. If both parties are poor, or both parties are rich, there's no commotion. They and everybody else recognise nature's work, and let it go. It is only when the man is well off and the girl is poor that the girl makes a scene and the man gets called bad names. Deuce take it, I say that what men are women are."

Miss Lily was standing before the fireplace. At this point she began to gather the material of her dress in both hands and to slowly raise her skirt to illustrate what she next remarked.

"Do you know, Miss Lamont, I once came near" — here she lifted a foot and slowly moved it far forward, as one would do to cross a muddy rill or flowing gutter — "I once came near making — a step — over the — conventional boundary — and putting myself out of the pale of correct society — till it blew over?"

"Lily!" from Miss Henrietta.

"Yes, and the man backed out, or I'd have done it."

"Oh-h-h!" Laura exclaimed, in unfeigned amazement. "Of course you are joking. But how can you jest like that?"

"She's a great tease, Miss Lamont. Lily, you go too far. You forget that Miss Lamont does not know your style of joking," Henrietta said.

"That's all right," Lily replied, a trifle bitterly, it seemed. "I am most serious when I joke. You see, I aint' trying to pull any one's — limb, I suppose I must say. You are, and I'm not to spoil your game. I'm on, my dear."

XVII.

BRYAN CROSS APPEALS FOR RESCUE

> "And then I told her all my troubles,
> Her eyelids dropp'd, she held her breath;
> And, now — my thoughts don't run on death." — *Goethe.*

AS Laura drove back to her home she did not delude herself as to the taste this visit left upon her dainty moral palate. She hoped that she had seen the worst side of the Van Nesses, and that at other times they were far different. Miss Lily's manner seemed defiant and cross. Perhaps they had been quarrelling. At all events, Laura looked far ahead beyond the sisters and their ways, into the brilliant, famous world, where Courtlandt Beekman figured. She knew that the "Four Hundred" could not all hold such views, or (even occasionally, and in jest) indulge such license in thought and speech. And she was right. She remembered to have read and been told that there is in the smart set a clique whose members love to seem unconventional and to startle their neighbours. They are of the hunting and yachting coteries, and spend much of their time with the unconventional men who are most given to those sports. She argued to herself that these sisters were what are called "men's women," to distinguish them from womanish, or women's women, and again she was right. But in hoping to know the superior many through the means of this acquaintance with the Van Nesses, was she right? It could be managed with money, diplomacy and patience, perhaps — and with a tough cuticle. But, even then, the front door would have been preferable as an entrance way.

All of which shows how much she had to learn.

From her gate she descried the silken skirt of her mother at the front door, and, from a movement of it which we would not have discerned, she surmised that something was amiss.

"Oh, Laura!" her mother exclaimed, grasping her hand and clinging to it. "I am so glad you have come. There's such news in the paper! Bridget showed it to me, and I haven't known whether to grieve for you or not. Did you — was there anything between you and Mr. Cross?"

"Nothing but friendship, mother. Is he married, then?"

"I'm so relieved," said the shadow of motherhood. "I don't know what it says. I was too flustered. I read the words 'Bryan Cross's Love,' and tried to see if it was about you, Laura, dear, but I couldn't. My mind went all sixes and sevens. I'll get you the paper, dear, and you shall tell me what it's all about."

Laura did not wait to remove her jacket and hat, but sat down in a hall chair, and in a moment was absorbed in what she was reading. Absorbed and shocked, besides, for this was an account of what purported to be a grave scandal. A man named Buck Darbley, it appeared, had come to New York avowedly to kill Mr. Cross for having induced his only daughter, Tonette, to leave her home in Northern Montana and join him in New York. The man kept a sportsman's hotel in the Rocky Mountains, and there Bryan Cross had spent a month nearly two years before, since which time the daughter had 'acted as if she was bewitched' by Cross. She carried his photograph about with her, sat staring at it for hours every day in the forest, talked about him continually, and threatened to go to him whenever she was reprimanded. At last, she had run away from home, and her father was pursuing her. He had not found her at Mr. Cross's home, and Mr. Cross, who faced the father bravely and calmly, denied all knowledge of the girl since he had last seen her in her mountain home. Nevertheless, there were found policemen and neighbours of the Crosses who declared that a strangely spoken, queerly dressed girl had been seen idling near Mr. Cross's home only a few days before the father's arrival in town. Mr. Cross, the reporter wrote, was to lecture in New Haven that night and in Albany on the next night.

"He had a narrow escape from a violent death," the report concluded, "and if he is innocent he is to be commiserated, but if he is guilty his manner can only be described as brazen in the extreme."

Laura read the article again after an interval of an hour, and then assured herself that beyond the great headlines and perfervid language with which its facts were ornamented, it contained very little to disturb Mr. Cross's admirers. The father's rage was not justified by any facts he had to offer concerning Bryan's behaviour while at his hotel, and his failure to find his daughter where he sought her made his public outcry and his threat to kill Bryan take on the character of an unjustifiable blow at his own daughter's fair name. With great impatience Laura awaited the next day's disclosures, which proved very puzzling to her and disappointing to those who are always eager for the worst in every such case. Shelled and stripped of all its word-wrappings, the kernel of it was that the girl had not been found and the father had gone back to Montana with his lips so tightly sealed that not all the reporters in town could get a word out of him.

On that afternoon, as Laura sat over her sewing, Bryan Cross was announced. She ran down to meet him, framing congratulatory exclamations as she went. She did manage to give him a warm and cheery greeting, but it was only because the impulse had been too strong to be overcome by the shock his appearance gave her. Again he was as we saw him when he found himself accused of wrong-doing in the heat of his first success as an orator.

"Oh, Miss Lamont," he said, in an almost sepulchral voice, "unless you save me I am a ruined man."

"Why — but do sit down, Mr. Cross," she said. "What has happened to make you look as you do? I was shocked by the first accounts of that Montana man's story, though really every one must have seen that it was a tissue of suspicion, or else the wildest raving. But that's over; now what —"

"It is not over, Miss Lamont," Bryan groaned. "It has only just begun. The father was right. His daughter did come to me. She is at my house this minute. Was ever man so cursed as I am? Since I was a boy, Miss Lamont, I have never reached out for any prize, large or small, that some terrible disgrace did not throw its shadow over the object. And the worst of all is that in every case I have deserved it. I have always been guilty as I am to-day. Oh, this will kill my sister. I think of her first. It comes just as a rich congregation of my own faith has offered me its pulpit, but I don't care for that — or the ruin of my position in every other relation I bear to the world. I only think of the death-blow it will deal to Mabel."

"True? You guilty, Mr. Cross? Have you come to me — a woman, also, like that Western girl, to ask — in pity's name, what can you ask in such a case?"

Cross sprang from his chair and wrung his hands. He tried to find the words he wished to speak but failed, and began pacing the floor.

"Listen," he said at last. "It may be impossible — or you may judge me more severely, even, than I deserve. It may be that in any case I am unutterably selfish to come to you, a single young woman, in my distress, but in the whole world I can see no other who has the power to help me. What I ask is that you take the girl in here, into this home, until the scandal blows over. She will not go back to her people. She has turned against me with scorn. She is sinned against by me, and but for me would have been beyond the reach of reproach. O heaven! I shall go mad; my sister will not survive the blow a day — if you cannot see your way to what I ask."

"Take her in my home? Shield her? a disgraced woman? And shield you? Mr. Cross, ask yourself if you have not lost your senses already?" Indignation rang in her words.

"Disgraced?" Bryan exclaimed, turning in his walk and facing Laura with a searching glance. "In God's name, do you think that? She's not disgraced, and will not be if you will help her. I will stake my life upon it that she is as pure as any woman alive. She has come to no harm — and never will if you or some one of your sex will stand by her in this moment of doubt. If she only would go home no one could point a finger at her, but she — she is a woman and refuses. I offered to marry her and make the only amends in my power for what has happened, but, again, she proved a woman, and tortured my offer into an insult. She challenged me to stand aside and witness how she would make her own way alone in the East. She told her father the same thing. He has a second wife with whom she does not get along happily, and she will never go back. Father and daughter were locked in one another's arms in my house this noon, and he was crying over her like a child. Oh, Miss Lamont, you had a right to refuse to help her, but I did not think you would justify the old saying that a woman has no pity for her kind."

"I'm sorry you think I could," Laura interposed, "but you used very strong words, Mr. Cross, and then left me to infer that you meant what they implied. We would get along ever so smoothly if you would take the case from the beginning, and let me understand it."

"You are right. I am quite distracted; please let that be my apology," Bryan said. "Well, from the beginning, the miserable story is that I went out to Darbley's when I was in very poor health two years ago. He was away with an army officer, on an exploring expedition, and there was no hunting. The stepmother ran the hotel. I was the only visitor, and the girl and I were thrown together. To amuse myself, never dreaming of any serious consequences, I yielded to the girl's extraordinary desire for knowledge of modern city life. I told her no stories that were not true, but purposely made the most of the luxuries and brilliancy of the homes, streets, theatres, and shops of a great city. I enjoyed her relish of what I told her, and for a month she kept begging for more and more of my descriptions. If I may use the expression, which is more against myself than her, it turned her head. She ran away to see New York, not me — she told me so with the utmost scorn."

"And she's a nice girl?" Laura asked, a trifle tenderly.

"She is a diamond, though in the rough, as you may imagine," Bryan replied. "She's of French stock; d'Arblay was the original name of the family. Her given name, Tonette, is the ignorant perpetuation of 'Antoinette,' the name of a daughter in each generation. She is about your age — an honest, wholesome, fearless creature, beautiful in face, form, movement, and in every posture, when she is in her native woods, though it may shock you to see how she looks in the realms of civilisation."

"Yet you offered to marry her, Mr. Cross. That was too generous. There seems no reason why you should have risked your happiness — and hers, too, by such an offer."

"I cannot tell you a falsehood — though it may be only an omission — or even allow you to think a merely partial truth," said he. "I was not generous. I intended only to be just and honourable. There is something I have not told you. I — I — it is very difficult, Miss Lamont, but I must tell you. You see, it came about like this: an accident happened to her when we were deep in the wilderness, and — oh, I must first tell you that, though I never deceived her, or made love to her, or anything of the sort, we used to walk hand-in-hand, and romp and carry on, you know, like a boy and girl — truly, we might have been brother and sister. And she is a madcap, I assure you. Well, an accident happened, and I thought she was killed. When she revived she called my name, and — and — I was very much affected. I was so overjoyed to hear her speak at all that I — I kissed her. Only on that occasion, Miss Lamont — and not above two or three times."

"Must I have the details?" Laura inquired, for the confession threatened to become embarrassing.

"But you must know it all to know her. I'm sure I'd rather not tell you, but if you are to know her, I must. In a way it bears out, or easily might have exemplified, all I have said to you about the perils of an idle, pleasure-ruled existence. The conditions were all there, only, thank God — But as I was saying, she had been in great danger and was unconscious, and we had been much together, and were alone; it seems a flimsy excuse, maybe, to those of stronger will or calmer nature than I, but it's all I have. I knew I had done wrong, and for a week, until I came away, I gave her no cause to think otherwise of me than as an acquaintance. When she came to New York and straight to me, I imagined it was due to this advantage I had taken of her. I reasoned that if she had magnified what I had done I had only myself to blame, and I thought the fairest, manliest course was to offer her marriage."

"It seems she was less impressed by her adventure," Laura ventured, laughing as if at her own light words, but in fact to relieve her amusement at his naïve recital.

"I might not have thought so much of it myself, though I hope I am not a trifler, if it were not that her conduct became so extraordinary after that — er — episode. From that moment she became gentled, softened, very unlike the hoyden she had been. She followed instead of leading me, and seemed to cling to my presence. It was a revelation to me of more than I can express."

Laura thought of the kiss Archie had once so chastely bestowed. In that case the girl was not so strangely affected. Then she recalled a line of a German song wherein a young girl is said to have been changed into a woman in a second by a lover's kiss. She thought once more of her own single experience, and was newly disappointed. Amid all her thoughts she kept silence, so Bryan went on:

"Miss Lamont," he said, with solemnity, "on my word of honour, Miss Darbley told me to-day that I never had done what I have told you I did. She said that if I had dared to kiss her she would have shot me, rather than that such a man should live to boast of it. Oh, her scorn of me passes belief."

"She shall come here if she will," she said, unable to evade a chance to do a kindness. "Shall I go and fetch her to-morrow?"

"Do you see your way to do it — and will you, really?" Bryan all but shouted. "For nearly a week she has been concealed in my home by my sister's housekeeper. If Mabel knew — if she even suspected that, for my fault, a poor girl was likely to be cast adrift in the streets of New York, as she must have been if you had refused my request, poor Mabel would die of shame. I could have faced her with the girl as my betrothed, but the other thing, the scandal, would have killed her — and would have ended my career."

Again and again he thanked Laura, and called down blessings on her head. There could have been no more doubt of the sincerity of his gratitude than there had been of the misery of heart from which she had now lifted him. It was astonishing how quickly he grew calmer, how suddenly the colour returned to his striking face, the sparkle to his commanding eyes. Such was his extraordinary nature, to which his soul was tied as to a battered buoy in mid-sea, and he must sink or swim with it; sink and swim, in fact, alternately.

He had to hurry away to meet his lecture engagement in Albany, and he strode along the path to the gate, his load of anguish vanished, leaving only the soreness where it had chafed him. He heard the applause of the audience of the night before new-sounding in his ears, and he straightened his figure as he anticipated the triumphs of the night to come.

To-night! ah, to-night! Why, he had almost forgotten that, because of that which was set down for to-night his anguish over Tonette's escapade had been so keen, so like a lightning stroke, as unescapable as it was warningless. For to-night a deputation from a wealthy Baptist church of New York was to receive his answer to a call to that pulpit. And now nothing interfered. He had qualified for the pulpit, and though he had thus far avoided its responsibilities, what other end was so becoming to the career on which he had embarked? He would accept the call, and from a fixed height hurl down his warnings to the heedless devotees of caste and pleasure who were creating in America, as he thought, the same conditions that are proving a blight upon England, where the people are divided into a hard, unbrotherly camp of the rich and of those who admire and abet them, and a horde of helpless, sodden, alms-cursed toilers and parasites. He had kept from the pulpit because of an impediment in his belief, but, now, he would summon full faith and it would come. Now, his seat in life's saddle was firm. He was no longer timid. He dared ride, or even break a lance with anybody. Yes, he would accept the call, and preach his first sermon in a week.

Poor Bryan Cross! forced to be his own keeper, as every one of us is, to be sure, though few, perhaps, are so little fitted for the responsibility as he.

XVIII.

TRANSFORMING A FAIR BARBARIAN

> "A creature not too bright or good
> For transient sorrows, simple wiles
> . . . .
> Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears and smiles."
>
> — *Wordsworth.*

MISS LAMONT and Tonette Darbley sat stiffly apart in the coupé that carried them from Bryan's sister's home to the Canadienne's boarding-house. The wealthy maiden looked steadily out of the window on her side, yet, from the corner of one eye, she studied the round dark face, the dancing black eyes, the untrained body (like a bag of flour with a string round the middle) of the poor girl who had flown across the plains and prairies and Alleghenies, as do those wild ducks which annually course from California's lakes to the Chesapeake. Most particularly she noted the short, broad, muscular hand of Tonette — strange to a needle and familiar with a gun — and the stripe of red wrist and arm between that hand and a sleeve of the jacket she had long ago outgrown. Laura raised her eyes to the sky and sighed. In her time she had dressed fifty dolls, but how to dress this live creature — mercy sakes!

Tonette, on her side, sat frankly studying her rescuer. She was very nervous, as one could see by the way she bit her lips and kept wetting them with her tongue, and fumbling and fussing with her broad red hands. Judging by what one knows of refined and softened girls, one would suspect that Tonette was wishing herself out of her scrape and back again with a rough, easily cozened father for a champion, and a shrewish stepmother thrown in for burdensome good measure. But it does not do to judge one set of women by another set so widely different. Tonette, in fact, was looking Laura over — her hair, like ripe wheat in a strong sun, her peachy skin, her eyes of turquoise, her graceful form, so deftly fitted by her stylish dress — was looking all this over and saying, "If I don't sail right in and hug and bite her I shall scream; only

I daresn't, 'cause she isn't human; she ain't the same as me, anyhow."

"First of all, stays," Laura was thinking; "and a shirt-waist and a skirt. Then she'll pass muster for a day in the boarding-house. But after that, — oh, what an undertaking it will be to make a young panther, or a deer, or whatever sort of wild animal she is, look like a human creature."

"It will be awful," Tonette was cogitating. "She'll rear and buck like a colt, but I've got to bite or hug her or scream."

Laura rapped on the front window of the coupé, and called to the driver to stop. "Please wait," she said to Tonette; "I'll only be a few minutes." Then she stepped out of the carriage and passed through the door of a great shopping store. Five minutes later she returned, and bidding the cabman drive around the corner into the side street and wait there for further orders, she followed the vehicle on foot. When it stood still, she got in and produced from her pocket a long yellow tape measure.

"I'm going to ask you to let me take a great liberty with you, Miss Darbley," she said; "I'm going to — "

"Tonette's my name," said the girl. "I wisht you'd let me call you by your first name. Seems to me first names is only for servants and children here in the East, but out my way we ain't got no use for stiffness of no kind, and we just Tom and Beck and Bill and Sary every one we know. Out our way last names is for putting on the outside of letters, that's all. If you don't mind, what is your name?"

"Laura, and if it will make you feel more at ease, you may call me so. Now, let me take your bust measure — thirty-four — and round your waist — why, it's thirty, but when we make you over into an Eastern shape it will be, well, it will be for you to say about that. Now, please stand right up, quick, before people see us. Bend your head and body, but be sure and stand up straight so that I can get the length for a skirt. Thirty-six; there — thirty-four, thirty, thirty-six — thank you, dear. Now, I'm going to get you a nice waist and a skirt — pink or cerise or a red plaid for the shirt-waist, I think will be nice, and — what about the skirt?"

"If I was a-going to get me anything to wear," said the girl, with a faltering voice, and her eyes already afloat with tears, "I'd just get everything the same's you've got on; you do look so sweet. But — but —" and now she burst out crying, heartily.

"What is it, Tonette?" Laura asked, sitting down and slipping an arm around her, regardless of the chance that passing pedestrians might look in; "what makes you cry?"

"I'm so darn miser'ble," said the girl. "I ought to known it would be this way, but I hain't never been away from home, 'n' I dunno no more 'n a shoat 't breaks loose from a sty."

"But what's the matter? If you're homesick you shall go home; whatever you want you shall do, dear. Only we must get you some clothes, first, whatever you do, because you will be stared at and made very uncomfortable if you aren't dressed like other people."

Tonette continued to cry, to try to speak, and to cry the more. Laura drew her to herself and kissed her.

"Go 'way," cried Tonette; "you shouldn't kiss me. I'm only rubbage — 'longside of you. Gi'mme one more kiss, won't you?"

"There," said Laura, laughingly, bestowing another kiss on the pouting lips of the sobbing girl; "now, tell me what makes you feel so miserable."

"'Cause I ain't got money for no clothes. 'T least, I've only got four dollars and eighty cents paw gave me when he went away."

"But I've all the money that's needed," Laura said. "You can pay me afterward if you want to."

"If I want to? Well, I guess I want to," Tonette replied. "Paw says no Darbley never owed a man a cent longer'n it took to git the money to pay him, 'n' I guess I ain't built no different from the rest of the family."

By soothing words and coaxing arguments it was soon brought about that Laura should buy, and Tonette should get work and pay back — a ridiculous arrangement, though Tonette could not know it was so, and Laura was satisfied. Presently, the carriage started on with the two women holding a huge pasteboard box upon their knees. Only Pandora's box when it was full could be compared to this magic receptacle. Pandora would discover it more immediately serviceable than her own were she to find herself in

Madison Square at this minute, for it contained everything she would be likely to need except a hat and shoes. The new waist was there and the promised skirt, and many things about which a masculine author can know only as he knows the garments of the trees in summer.

"There are pins," said Laura, "and this is my own dressing-room, so no one will disturb you. I'll wait in my bedroom, right through this door till you come, all Easternified, to let me see you."

"Say," was presently heard through the door, "I can't make head or tail of these here what-d'-ye-call-'ems." Therefore Laura went into the dressing-room and elucidated the mysteries of the one rigid, obdurate, and ultra-artificial garment with which the mountain girl had had no previous acquaintance.

Perhaps the exquisite, scrupulously groomed city woman had not been certain that the uncouth stranger was safely to be admitted to intimate relationship. Such a doubt might easily have come of reflection upon Tonette's rude past. Perhaps but for this, Laura would have gone, without being called, into the dressing-room at a forward stage of the change from chrysalis to butterfly. At any rate, when she did go in, all doubt fled. It was Aphrodite and not Bridget whose arms glistened like well-scrubbed marble before Laura's exacting eyes. Indeed, the doubt went with such startling suddenness that when the woman with a dress and she who lacked one stood face to face, Laura embraced the robust girl and looked into her merry brown eyes, and saw Love's handmaiden, Affection, in them — as Tonette did in Laura's. The fastidious had found nothing about the uncouth that was not as sweet as a field daisy and a hundredfold more lovable. That was when Love came to make a trio which was never broken while the mortal members of it drew breath.

"We're going to be good friends," Laura said, still looking into the laughter-lighted brown eyes.

"I'm only a stick of driftwood," Tonette replied, giggling. "There ain't nothing to like about me."

"I see lots," said Laura.

"And I like you so I could e'enamost holler," Tonette made joyous answer.

For three days clothing kept coming to Tonette, until at last two Saratoga trunks would not hold all the new things Laura bought for her. Laura had found her to be like a new doll, in need of everything but a head, body, and limbs to fit her for the life that lay ahead of her.

"You've come into this part of the world like a baby born eighteen years old," she said to her.

"I've certainly got everything to git, haven't I?" Tonette answered, with her bubbling laugh.

Laura flew about in cabs and cars, ordering boots of many sizes, hats of many shapes, and dresses of many colours, all to be sent to the boarding-house. There selections for Tonette were made from them under her eye and that of a dressmaker who came every day and stayed till night. Underwear, hosiery, gloves, scarfs, collars, studs, sleeve-buttons, handkerchiefs, jackets — truly a stream such as one might see if a mountain torrent swept through the largest department store in Denver, flowed into the boarding-house and whirled into Laura's bedroom, there to eddy and deepen until it overflowed all the furniture. Laura sighed and told the dressmaker that it was the most trying and wearing task (the puns were unconscious) she had ever undertaken. And the dressmaker sighed and threw up her head and rolled her eyes in sympathetic assent. Of course, they were not taking each other seriously. The fact was that few women have ever had the chance to be so happy, according to the most cherished feminine ideals, as was Laura during this experience. The joy of a child who transforms a toggle-jointed sawdust-loaded toy into a beautifully dressed miniature woman is feeble compared to the intelligent artistic delight Laura felt in changing Miss Rocky Mountains into Miss d'Arblay of Powellton, New York. She wished that the "sleuth hounds" who were aimlessly searching for the girl could be ignored, so that she might tell her lady friends what she was doing and turn them green with envy.

"Have you got a head for business?" she inquired of Tonette one day.

"I dunno; guess if I haven't I've mebbe got one to learn it with."

"I'm going to ask you to help me look after a sort of business I have at my place in the country," Laura said. She had seen that if she transferred her market to Newburgh and opened a shop or two there, her new companion could visit them daily, and make the rounds of the country gardens which fed them, being, perhaps, of great service in smoothing the management of the entire industry. "You ride horseback, don't you?" she asked.

"I'm part horse, myself," Tonette said. "I'm upper half girl and lower half horse. I was near about born on a horse, I reckon. But I'd be like a baby again if I rode here in the East, because I've always rode a-straddle."

"Astride is how we say that," Laura volunteered; "though we never do the thing itself. I'm going to get you to buy a horse to suit yourself."

"Don't tell me any more," said the brown barbarian, "or I'll turn loose and holler like a Flathead at a sun dance."

On one afternoon, while Laura was taking tea with Mrs. Chester, Courtlandt Beekman called and met both the ladies. Mrs. Chester was puzzled by the attention, as he had never before presumed upon his slight acquaintance to strengthen it by a visit. She whispered to her companion before he was shown into the drawing-room that "she could not understand it at all," though she was visibly flattered by the attention. Laura sought the explanation in her own rapidly beating heart, and found it there. The gallant and handsome descendant of the Knickerbockers had divined her presence there, she was certain, and it was his heart — so well controlled and masked to all but her — that had prompted the visit. She blushed scarlet from a delightful guiltiness, as she told herself that the visit was to her and not to her companion.

The result of the visit was a call upon Laura later in the evening, a drive to Mrs. Chester's house to take her also to a small dinner at the Waldorf, and then an evening at the theatre, and a supper at Sherry's afterward. So studied was Beekman's equal division of his attention to his fair companions that Mrs. Chester was the more deeply puzzled the longer the evening wore on. Not a speaking glance did he throw to Laura, not an instant did he linger over the adjustment of her coat on leaving the theatre; he did not even take her hand on meeting or on parting with her. He did, however, so arrange the homeward journey that Mrs. Chester was first set down at her door and he and Laura rode by themselves to the Canadiennes'. When thus alone with her, his wit and his spirits rose high, and it might have seemed to an onlooker that he was doing his utmost to make a good impression, — or, at least, that he was very much pleased with the company in which he found himself.

At the Canadiennes' door he handed Laura out of the carriage and mounted the stoop with her to wait until the door was opened. Then he said, " Good-night, I am so glad you enjoyed the evening," and — nothing more!

How " unconscionably long " — like the merry Charles of England — she was in shuffling off her (silken) coil that night! How often she wondered if she had appeared at her best and — copying Dandy Jim of Caroline — " looked in the glass and found it so." How prettily decked with maidenly smiles she kept her sweet young face, the telltale of her soul's communings. And how long she lay awake upon her pillow. A hundred times she pouted while recalling that he had not been tender or akin to wooing in his manner. But as many times smiles chased away the pouting, and she whispered to her pillow, " It was I that he came to see! How handsome and noble and brilliant he is. It was not Mrs. Chester but me that he came to see."

XIX.

MISS TONY'S CONFESSION

> "Not so sick, my lord,
> As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies." — *Macbeth.*

FROM Fishkill to her house in Powellton, the whole way broke into a smile when Miss Lamont returned, even after a short absence. The poor ran out of their doors, the tradesmen lounged to the front of their shops, men of every station raised their hats, and the most heedless of the gamins by the roadside grinned their welcome as she drove by. "Here's Miss Lamont," "Miss Lamont's come back," were the notices that flew ahead of her. But, when she returned on this occasion, one imagined one could hear the whole vicinage say: "God bless you, Miss Lamont, we thought you'd never come back. But who's the pretty roly-poly by your side? Isn't she rollicking, though, and full of mischief? And isn't she a swell? If you've got her for a foil, to set off your golden blond-ness with her black hair and almost swart complexion, you could not have made a better choice, Miss Lamont."

This is what one read in the emphasised smiles of the people after her long absence, and in the extra sweep of their hats and the sustained stare at the companion by her side. Village life is familiar and inquisitive the world around; which is why the vulnerable abuse it so, and the virtuous who move to great cities miss it and long for it all their lives.

Those phrases, "pretty roly-poly" and "isn't she swell?" did our imagination catch them correctly? Could they have been called forth by the little rough chip of the Rockies, Tonette Darbley? Yes, indeed, but Antoinette d'Arblay, after this, if you please. Laura insisted that it should be so, and we must exhibit her weaknesses as well as her triumphs, if we expect to succeed in the hand-glass and mirror trade. Tonette would have liked Laura to call her Snip, Pig, or Rag, as Louis the Well-beloved used to call his daughters, if Laura had preferred to do so, but she signed herself Tonette, and was best pleased when her friends addressed her as Tony.

She was indeed pretty. Hers was a round berry-brown face, with jet hair half framing it, with laughing brown eyes under coal-black crescents, and with very hearty, thick red lips, which spoke to her love of life. It was rustic beauty, red-blooded, not blue, for the colour always results from ancestral training; in this case interrupted, but almost certain to be caught up again in her children. As to the other seven heads of her — it being laid down by the highest French authority that the perfect human being is eight heads tall — they were so becomingly draped, and so suffocatingly, unclassically but fashionably squeezed in at the middle that, to be done with the analysis once and for all, she was at once "swell" and a "pretty roly-poly."

Mrs. Lamont, who saw in her a radiant work of art, and had not understood her history, made her a courtly bow, and addressed her in keeping with it, hoping she was not "ennuied by her journey." Tonette drew herself up two or three inches taller and imitated the old lady's salute, saying, "Thank you, ma'am, you can't phase me," which she prided herself was a very choice selection from the mother tongue. When she was taken to her room that was to be, she burst into choking laughter.

"Oh, dear!" she gasped; "your mother — wasn't it funny?"

Very delicate ice that was for Tonette to skate on, and Laura's face gave warning. "You are cruel to laugh at my poor mother," she said.

"Well, I wasn't," Tonette replied, herself wounded at the suspicion. "I was really laughing at myself — dressed up in clothes that's all out of place on me, like them that monkey had on that we saw in the street, so that your maw thought I was a sure-enough lady. Lor-zee! how surprised she will be when I open my mouth and the sawdust rolls out."

At dinner that evening Tonette was shown into the splendid dining-room, combining the best taste of the last century and the choicest art of this. She had learned a great deal with her quick, sensitive mind and eye, and no one who saw her take her place at table and rearrange her finger-bowl, doiley, and napkin — utensils undreamed of by her a few weeks before — could have criticised the performance. But the beauty of her surroundings overwhelmed her. She could scarcely eat, and to talk was out of the question, unless it were possible, as she would have said, "to holler." Between mouthfuls and between courses she rolled her eyes at the electric-lighted dado of gold above the ancient panelling of oak, at the portraits sunken in the oak, at the flowers, the banquet lamps, the jewel-like crystal, the shining silver — for Laura's table was set in much the same way every night, whether there was company or not. Never had Tonette seen the like or read a description of its equal, or imagined that a repast could be so bravely and beautifully set forth.

"Oh," said she, when she was alone with her benefactress, "if Bryan Cross described such luxury (the author is putting her ideas into his own words) I never realised his full meaning. This is what I ran away from home to see; this is what I tried to imagine as the sort of home that all Bryan's beautiful ornaments must have been made to consort with. But, now, I am frightened. Now that I have known you and your magnificent surroundings, I dread what is coming to me. I am not such a fool as to think I can live in a place like this except as a servant

— a thing that I would sooner die than be. If there's any kind of hard work that can be done by a girl who feels herself equal to the highest in the land, I will do it to be with you and to enjoy these things for which I was born with a longing. But I know that nothing that I can do would pay for such comfort and luxury. I am frightened. I see that I shall have to go home, though I shall pine away and die there."

"Silly child," Laura called down from the great height of a slight seniority; "I brought you here at Mr. Cross's request to silence a scandal. Since then I have been more than repaid, for I have learned to like you, therefore I shall be glad to help you long after keeping you with me has ceased to be of service to him. You can do nothing, now. You forget you are hiding from the reporters. When they have forgotten you — which will be very soon — and when you have become more like the people around us in speech and manner, you shall be my assistant, perhaps my wise little adviser — we shall see."

"You spoke about Mr. Cross," she added. "Do you know you have never told me why you came to his house when you ran away. Tell me now the whole story of your acquaintance with him."

"Oh, that ain't nothing," Tonette said. "Seems like that was so long ago and things was so different; it's just as if I was a child, and 's if I'd growed up since I got here. Bryan came mooning out where I was, sick and miser-'ble, wantin' to hunt grizzlies with paw. Him a-huntin' grizzlies! Why, the bears would laugh if they heard of it and had any fun in 'em, which grizzlies ain't. Anyhow, he come, and paw was away with them sojers, and maw was that mad at me we didn't speak, all 'cause I went to Gulchville with paw and charmed a little locket out of him to wear with my Sunday dress — which maw didn't have no locket — didn't have ary a locket — how do you starch and iron it when you want to say 'didn't have no locket' here in the East?"

"Did not have any," Laura said; "but do not try to change your speech except as your ear tells you. You will soon speak as we do."

"Um," said Tonette, pursing up her mouth as if to kiss Laura a dozen feet away, "I do like you, an' you're a-goin' to let me, ain't you?

Well, so Bryan and me was throwed — thrown — together, and — oh, but I forgot the most important part of all. You see, if there ever was a dude it was Bryan in them — those — days. My sakes! he was a walking jewelry store. He's give it all up since he got home, but at that time he was just over from Germany and Paris and Berlin and France and them parts. And he had diamond rings and gold chains and silver hair brushes and solid silver things to fuss up your finger nails with, and scarf-pins and scarf-rings and a solid silver penknife and a shoe horn 't must have been worth a hundred dollars, and his sister's tintype sot in — set in solid silver, and silver all around his kerlone bottles and a diamond stud — which he said was vulgar and always kep' hid under his necktie, or else didn't wear it — and, oh, I can't never begin even in the middle of the bee-yutiful things he had and which he used to leave scattered around his room to home — at paw's, I mean. Even I sensed that them was things for a woman more'n for a man. Um, how I did used to tiptoe into his room and glue my eyes onto all them things o' his!

"Well, now, Miss Laura, I want to make a confession. I'm wicked. Oh, yes, I am. But I'm wicked outside where everybody sees it. I ain't wicked inside or wicked in my home, and all honey on the outside. I couldn't sleep if I was that away. I'd rather be bad and have everybody know it than let on I was good and have me and God know it was a lie. So, anyway, when he was off moonin' I slipped into his room and I put on his pants right over my dress — had to turn 'em up a yard at the bottom, you know — and a shirt of his and his vest, so's I could wear his rings and a scarf-pin an' his watch and chain. And there I stood a-looking at myself in a glass about as big's my face; had to stand it in different places to see different parts of myself — oh, you don't know what living's like till you've camped out with paw awhile. Funny? I reckon a kitten with doll's shoes on its feet don't feel no funnier than I looked. And I heard a laugh and I turned around and there stood Bryan, rounding me up. Well, he laughed and I laughed. We stood up and laughed, and then we sat down to it. After that me and him was the best of friends and spent every day together, round the pond 'r else out in the woods.

"He kep' wantin' to talk about God; don't know what ailed him, but he was all the time wantin' to talk about how we knew for sure about God, 'n' such things as that. I shut him up 'cause it makes me creepy — that kind of talk. I talk to God nights, Miss Laura, and tell him everything, but I'm scared to talk *about* him, behind His back, like. So I shut Bryan up, and we was pardners. For four weeks steady I made him tell me about New York and Chicago and rich women and their dresses and joolry and marble baths and the theatres. I was set clean crazy thinking of where all such pretty things as his must belong; and I stayed crazy — and I'm crazy yet. So when I couldn't stand it no longer, breaking ice in my washbowl and wearing the same old cotton dresses, and having nothing but the roughest folks around me, I lit out, and here I am. There! the ladle's bended, and my story's ended."

"Did you like Mr. Cross very much, Tonette? No, no — honour between friends," Laura coaxed. "He told me he asked you to marry him, dear — why do you make wry faces?"

Tonette seized a knee in her clasped hands and rocked to and fro reflectively.

"I'm glad I didn't like him," she said. "I mean in that real serious way, 'cause he talks 's much 's a woman. Told you that, did he? I suppose he knows you right well — of course. Did he tell you what I had to say about it? Yes? Well, I reckon he would. I didn't like him like you, 'cause there's only one of you comes in a box. You could beat me and I'd kiss your hand like a dog, Miss Laura. That ain't how I liked Bryan. He's brave; I'll say that. I slipped and rolled into the river when it was all rushing snow-water, rippin' its way through the rocks. And he run along on the bank and got even with where I was in the water and jumped in and pulled me out. I was stunned by hittin' a rock, and was heavy as a deer's carcase; and he havin' to fight for his own life, all the time; but he saved me. After that, when I come to, lyin' in his arms — oh, whatever's the use, Miss Laura? It's all so useless — like a shot that don't hit nothin'; gone quick and best forgot, 'cept between me and him."

"No, go on, please. I am very much interested."

"Well, after he saved me and after — something else he done — if you must know, he kissed me; there! After that, I thought I maybe belonged to him; he maybe liked me a lot, I thought. So that was why I always reckoned if I did come East and he should have kep' on likin' me, and should, maybe, ask me — why then it would be my duty. You can see how it was, can't you?"

Laura nodded.

"But when I did come on, it got in the papers, and he said my character was gone, and his sister would die, and he'd be ruined, same as I was a'ready. And then he turned — and I'll give him credit where it's due — and he says, 'Never mind me or my sister; first thing's you.' That's where he was brave again. Then he spoiled the whole of it. 'I've done this thing,' he says; 'I kissed you as I didn't ought to,' he says, 'and you've followed me here on account of it. I seen I was a fool, but I done it, and it turned your head, and now all I can do is to marry you. I must pay for my folly,' says he, 'rather 'n harm you worse.' Miss Laura, that was how he insulted me! He flung himself at me like a bone thrown to a wolf in a cage. I was so hot I exploded. 'I don't need savin' 's bad 's you do,' I says. 'I've took care of my character eighteen years all right, and I ain't so afraid of its spoiling on my hands as you are of yours. You kissed me?' I says. 'You never. You hain't seen the day you darst kiss me,' I says — and God's got to forgive me for that, 'cause I was only lyin' to protect myself. 'I'd have shot you,' I says, 'if you'd even brushed me with your face.' There now, Miss Laura, that's all, only I'm all hot again over it. To think of me comin' three thousand miles, beggin' rides most of the way, to have a man tell me he'd throw himself away and end all his bright hopes by marrying me, 'cause he was afraid for my character. I've got to go in another room and be by myself, Miss Laura, till I can see straight again."

XX.

A GLIMPSE OF THE UPPER TEN

> **"Why dost thou lure me to this garish pleasure,**
> **This pomp of light?" — *Goethe.***

LAURA had another cousin than Archibald Paton, one "Jack" Lamont, an own cousin, who had tried to do her inexpressible harm when she was poor and friendless. By his evil courses he had, still earlier, alienated the regard of his uncle, to whom he stood as near in blood as Laura. Finding that by no other process could he possibly inherit this uncle's fortune, to squander as he did his patrimony, he set out to marry her, but only when he learned that she was to become the heir to the Lamont estate. And, even then, the course he chose for carrying forward his despicable ends was the method of a scoundrel deaf to conscience and calloused against pity. In its proper place we will tell again to those who have not read it elsewhere, the story of his villainy. At the moment now dealt with, this redoubtable hero of a hundred disgraces and gallant par excellence of the gutter, was but the shell of himself, penniless — a wreck in body at last and — but it is needless to anticipate.

The chapter is best opened with Laura in her library looking surprised over two letters. The first was from Henrietta Van Ness, asking " could you possibly send over a check for two hundred dollars? I'm in an awful strait. Only for a little while, there's a dear little Miss Crœsus, and you shall have it back. P.S. I have such news to tell when I see you." The second was from Jack Lamont, the only being to whom she felt unkindly, whose mere name had only lately ceased to make her shudder. It was written shakily, hesitatingly, almost hopelessly. " I am very ill," it ran. " Am ordered to go in the country. I suppose you hate me — I know you have good cause — yet I will never give offence again, if you will be magnanimous. There is nowhere else that I can go. I am so ill and want to be with friends, in a home; though it must be now or very likely not at all. I may not be alive a little later."

Very long Laura pondered those two missives, as a very much older girl might weigh two proposals of marriage which she fancied might be the last she would receive.

"I do not see how Miss Van Ness can stoop to borrow money," she thought, "and the wording of her note is very — well, it certainly reveals no qualms. That must be her way of trying to hide her sensitiveness."

"Tonette," she called from the foot of the staircase. "Don't you feel like a sleigh-ride? There's snow enough and I've heard some sleighs go by. Ask my mother if she wouldn't like to come, too. I'm going to the bank and telegraph office. Your hat and jacket? They're down here again, you untidy girl." Then, as she waited, she communed with herself again: "I wonder if he is really ill. He merely asks for a room and a bed in a house that was once a home to him. If he is ill, I simply cannot refuse him."

At the bank she inquired whether the Van Nesses kept an account there, and was told that they did not. Nevertheless, she wrote out a check for two hundred dollars, and, enclosing it with a note, drove with it to the telegraph office.

There she found a messenger by whom to send it to Miss Van Ness, and then she telegraphed to her lawyers in the city: " Please find out to-day, if possible, whether John Lamont ill. This very urgent."

" Now, Tonette," she said, " we have tried to do a good turn to two persons, and yet, instead of being happier, we are, at least I am, full of doubt whether I have done right in either case. It's funny; if I could do so I would not alter what I've done, yet I can't shake off the fear that I've made a mistake in each case."

" I don't know what you're talking about," Tonette made answer.

" Oh, yes, you do, my dear," Laura insisted; " you know that I am saying that if a woman has no man to rule her she gets along with impulse in his place. What you don't know — and I don't say I'm any wiser — is which is the better master."

" Oh, yes, you do," came from Tonette in mockery of Laura's tone and words, " 'n' I know too, — or rather Nature knows and don't give us a chance to argify — argi — now, there's a word I know's *pure* Montana. Argue, eh? Sounds short, that does. Most words here in the East sells by the yard, and that one ain't more than an inch, is it?"

"I can't imagine a man with the nerve to ask to be your husband," she said, after a pause. "And, then again, I can't imagine a man seein' you an' not askin', neither."

Laura's mother plucked Tonette's sleeve and bent over toward her.

"Sh-h-h," she whispered. "Has some one asked her?"

Tonette shook her head vigorously, with something of scorn for whoever might exhibit such presumption.

"My daughter's set against a formal wedding," said the old lady. "Do try to convince her that it is the only proper way. I know. Mine was a private marriage. I never want to hear of another. My child, why won't you take mother's word for it —" and so the inevitable came, and was not done with till all three ladies were back at the Clock House door.

More than a fortnight passed before Jack Lamont came to Powellton. Laura wrote him an invitation such as not every man's pride would permit him to accept, for she laid down conditions: that he had yet to prove his right to forgiveness, and that if the visit came to be regretted on either side he would promise to end it summarily.

But much that was exciting and of great importance to Laura took place before his visit. The "such news" to which Henrietta Van Ness referred in her note was that she had obtained for her an invitation to a very grand wedding at Rhinebeck, to take place in a few days. The names of the contracting parties and the guests, embracing many of the leaders of fashion in New York, whetted in her a keen longing to witness the affair and the company, so that without hesitation she promised to go; without hesitation, I say, but of course the usual difficulty of not having "a single thing to wear" intervened, and was overcome at great expense and trouble.

The wedding came, as all things in the future have their way of doing, and was very brilliant and exclusive; quite beyond any country wedding in recent history. At the reception at the bride's house Laura for the first time mingled shoulder to shoulder and face to face with a few of the famous " Four Hundred " conservers of New York's pretensions as a capital of Fashion. She saw these notables, too, in the way that is most becoming to them, through an opalescent girlish haze which rendered them all different from the rest of us in a score of ways that were to their advantage. She was introduced to several, and found them " gracious " and " so easy in their manners " — qualities which one hears attributed to the same class wherever one travels, though why those whose position is assured and who have the means to ensure their comfort should ever be anything but easy and gracious no one anywhere ventures to explain. In particular she met Courtlandt Beekman — the hope of seeing whom had outweighed all compunctions when she was weighing the arguments for and against intruding in that brilliant society. She was a trifle self-conscious in his presence, for never had any man impressed her and filled her thoughts as he had done. When his eyes met hers she felt as if his were charged with Röntgen rays and were looking straight through her. It did not seem possible that she could interest a man so travelled and distinguished, and yet there they were: she prattling volubly, he spurring her with questions and comment — and, mercy on her! everybody remarking them.

He drifted away in time, with a hearty word at parting. He was so used to touching and going like that, she thought, with his real feelings left at home, perhaps. Would she ever be "fashionable" to that degree, to the extent of hiding her feelings? She would rather not, she reflected, as she saw his broad straight back and shoulders looming over two ladies, and tried to convince herself that in the nature of the circumstances lay the probability that she would never realise his prophecy that he should know her better than he had ever known any woman. Others took his place in turn and made themselves agreeable, but through their dull voices she heard the echo of the sterling ring of his — a voice rich with honesty like his face. She felt as must a valley among the hills when the sun droops and sends chill shadows where its beams had been. The high light and the warmth had gone from the scene, and she, too, would be satisfied to leave it. But, among the others came Henrietta and Lily Van Ness, both a-tremble with a subject of great importance or pretending to be so, for one was never sure about them in such a matter.

If the snow lasted, Henrietta said, she and her friends were going to get up a grand sleighing party, to be followed by a dinner in honour of the Russian minister, "who was the dearest old bear alive, and a lot of the nicest people would come — and oh, la, la!" Words failed of coherence, and gave place to a hash of superlatives, supported by wriggles and translated by pantomimic gestures and gasps. Laura caught the spirit of the incident and, in her sympathy, "oh-my'd" with the sisters.

"But," and here was evidently a great obstacle — nothing short of an iceberg in the way, to judge by the freezing tone of that "but." "But," said Henrietta, "though it means everything to whoever does the honours — puts you in the swim and makes you the vogue, don't you know — I'm downright ashamed to dine them at our rotten old barracks, and, as for sleeping them there — people used to every comfort and luxury, don't you know — well, the day was, but isn't — with us. That's frank, don't you know?"

"Oh, Henrietta, that'll do for the curtain raiser," Lily interrupted; "now, for heaven's sake, say what you are coming to. She wants to know, you see, Miss Lamont, if she can give the dinner at your house and she can swim through in that way on the tail of your frock. For my part, I don't see why it wouldn't be all right, if you're agreeable."

"I mean it's often done, you know," Henrietta said; "when one's house is too small or one is in a flat or a hotel, why, in the city one takes a regular hall, but in the country one looks about for a friend with a house, doesn't one?"

Laura looked troubled and in need of a "modern instance," as the poet has said.

Foolish girl! to have doubt was well, but to have doubt of the wrong thing was not so well. Lend your house every day. What harm? But be sure you lend it to the right persons, always.

Modern instances a-plenty were cited to quell her misplaced anxiety. Still she appeared uneasy. Then men were dragooned to where she stood and put through their paces. Wasn't it quite proper — really quite the thing — to give a party and let a friend invite the people when there was a good reason — like living in a flat or a hotel or being a newcomer in the place, or whatever? "Oh, quite, we assure you. Really, it would be jolly, don't you know? We'll all go in for it," said the men.

Thus Laura was convinced, and not very reluctantly, for were not these people in the same set with Courtlandt Beekman? That was one reason that she liked that afternoon's taste of the Upper Ten — as what woman would not who knows that to be in and of them is to be on the crest of things worldly, hall-marked, a legal (that is to say, a social) tender everywhere.

On the cars homeward bound she somehow found herself beside a gentleman who had been introduced to her at the reception and had paid her only slight attention, yet who now evinced an anxiety to make himself most agreeable.

"You don't know Harry Kimball?" he asked. "I'm a great chum of Harry's, in fact, of all the — er — the Catamarans."

"And who are the Catamarans?" she inquired, not that she cared to know so much as that she desired to be polite.

"Who are the — oh, come; who are the Sandwich Islanders, you might as well ask — or the Monarchs of Europe," her companion replied. "Don't you know, really? I say! the Catamarans wouldn't feel complimented. Well, Harry is one, and I — well, I ain't exactly one — but I know them on the 'side,' as we say. Oh, it's nothing but a by-word, — one of those things which catch on and stick like a burr, and won't be rubbed off. Leonard Woodlawn, who wasn't always so witty, got it off about one wing of New York society, and it has been passed along ever since, sticking here and there, till now it has stuck to this newest lot. It isn't altogether nice — you mustn't mind, you know, because you asked me. 'They're Catamarans,' said Leonard, 'because they are very fast, carry a lot of sail, get along with very little wind and nothing else, sail in couples that are fixed as far apart as possible, and generally finish up with a header.' "

She comprehended the phrase about their being very fast, but, in general, the definition was so much Greek to her. It were well if she were never to know the Catamarans any better than she understood their description. It was a case where ignorance was bliss and knowledge almost a catastrophe.

XXI.

THE FRINGE OF SOCIETY

> "'A happy day indeed!' I cried;
> 'But tell me, which may be the bride?'
> The bumpkin answered with a stare —
> 'Lord, sir! I neither know nor care.'" — *Goethe.*

TROUBLED and pestered about the evils of pleasure life, Laura foresaw that a maidenly desire to "happen" in the orbit of the man she most admired was likely to change her course from amid people of occasional gaiety after work, to a circle of perpetual pleasure seekers. As long as she was conscious of no evil she would persist in this drifting, but she was young, unsophisticated, and very conscientious; therefore grey Doubt came and perched upon her bed canopy, her carriage front, her dining-table; the hideous bird would never away. She had the greatest doubts about the Van Ness sisters, and about the coming party; but, on the other hand, almost every day she read the name of Courtlandt Beekman in the newspapers; of his presence at the opera, of his leading a cotillion, of his participation in whatever was found in high life; and every time she read his name her desire to meet him drove away her doubts about her present course.

York Stone, her mother, Tonette — and her bank account, perhaps — were almost the only possessions in which she found unvarying comfort. She came back from the wedding with a heavier dependence on York Stone. It was natural. He was the only one of his entire sex who had aroused hope of help, and had not more or less disappointed her. Perhaps now he would not be so formal with her — perhaps he would show an interest in matters more personal than her charities. With his counsel, she could defy grey Doubt. She did not know why she expected him to change his behaviour. Certainly, she would never again throw herself at him with confidences about her private affairs after his pointed refusals to interest himself in them. But if he would not extend the needed hand, Heaven knew there seemed no man who would.

When she next met him he was overwhelmed with the work of improving the village and the condition of its people. For the present, at all events, it was idle to expect him to assume a new relationship, yet when, in all her life, was it likely that she would need his counsel more than at this moment? There was nothing better than to confide in her mother and Tonette — for the mere relief of crystallising her thoughts and apprehensions.

"Perhaps a certain mysterious knight will be at the party — who knows, eh, Laura?" her doting mother ventured.

"Don't talk to me about those Van Ness sisters," Tonette exclaimed; "if they ain't bad medicine there ain't no such a thing. I'll bet if I hit that Henrietta on her cheek or anywheres with a stone, she'd strike fire. I'd like to try it, I would. And as for her sister — well, all I can say is, that even the angels must hate her."

Henrietta came several times to the Clock House, and proved herself a past mistress at arranging for such a party as this was to be. The brands of champagne which were most certain to give satisfaction, the kind and quantity of whiskey to be offered in the library, with cigars and cigarettes and cocktail ingredients; the number of packs of cards — for the men always played "a little" after a party; the band, which if not *the* Hungarian must at least be in Hungarian dress; the menu to be left to the chef of a friend who would lend him for that night; these were the things Miss Van Ness considered most important, and which she lifted, unmindful of their weight, from Laura's shoulders.

When it came to arranging the putting up of certain of the visitors for the night, Henrietta allotted a Mrs. Williger, among others, to Laura's house. This young matron's behaviour at the recent wedding in Rhinebeck had attracted Laura's attention, and she had asked Lily Van Ness about her.

"Oh," Lily said, "that's a Mrs. Williger — and that's Mr. Bewick who's with her. His wife is an invalid and her husband's an old fool — so there you are."

"I'm sorry Mrs. Williger is to come," Laura said to Henrietta. "I did not like what I saw of her at the wedding."

"But you must remember that she was among old friends there," Henrietta replied; "she'd be more what-do-you-call-it here. Oh, much more, I assure you; circumspect, I mean, you know."

"Well, I'd rather it would be only men who stop here on that night," Laura replied in a tone that was final.

In the rearrangement this brought about she found that one of her rooms was allotted to Courtlandt Beekman.

"Oh, he's coming, is he?" Laura asked, as if merely to say something.

"Yes. He wants to meet the Russian minister. Mr. Beekman's not to my taste, I may as well tell you. He's all very well for polo and hunting and splurging — with his yacht and drag — when a splurge is what you're in for — he's awfully rich, you know; but he's too ramroddy; leans over backwards, don't you know? Very good men never seem quite human to me."

"But where is the Russian minister going to sleep?" Laura asked.

"Oh, he? Why — er — " Henrietta knew that the minister was not able to come, but to publish the fact would be to raise bothersome questions as to the advisability of going ahead with the party, which, from the first, had been planned solely for her own aggrandisement. "Why, where is he to go? Oh, yes, Harry Kimball is going to put him up."

Laura scented no lie in this, but in the fulness of time — even before the night of the party — she was aghast at the appearances of double-dealing on Henrietta's part which came up. For instance, though Laura had been led to believe she was to be under no other expenses than for the bare dinner, the wines, liquors, cigars, playing cards, ivory counters or chips, and half a dozen other purchases were all sent to her with bills for immediate collection. At eight o'clock on the fateful night, Laura having stayed in from the sleigh-ride to supervise the final preparations, the leader of the small orchestra which had been engaged, presented a bill for payment in advance, and demanded instant settlement. The money consideration was trifling compared to the mortification Laura felt at having been so coarsely deceived. The shame that she bore vicariously for the Van Ness sisters actually burned her cheeks.

Poor tender cheeks! If they took flame so early and so easily, what was likely to result when the greater trials came?

It was after nine o'clock when the sleigh-loads of fair faces above the mounds of fur and of great-coated gallants with a politeness that missed no chance to serve a woman, were emptied upon the Clock House porch. In ten minutes the spacious rooms on the ground floor and the stairs and dressing-rooms above were gay with bright colours and noisy with unfettered mirth. Twenty couples had come, with no Russian minister at their head, and the high pressure of the night's pleasure seemed reached at once. Never could less constraint have been shown by persons so new to their surroundings. Scarcely in a hotel could even such a party — so confident of the hospitality at their call — have made themselves thus instantly and thoroughly at home. Before the servants could grasp the situation, they found themselves trying to obey more commands than twice their number could have executed satisfactorily. In the wake of the Misses Van Ness the men found the library where those accomplished women mixed cocktails with a skill and knowledge beyond praise. Some of these went into the drawing-room to moisten feminine lips, cigarettes glowed in the library and halls, decorous laughter rolled to and fro. The old house was indeed in new hands, and yet it had come about as naturally as the capture of Holland by the Dutch. It did not appear to the company of bright and showy women and elegant, easy-mannered gallants as if an inharmonious chord could jar their content. Yet there was one among them who moved about helplessly at first, then distractedly; then stood ashamed and trembling with indignation.

As the reader surmises, this was the young proprietress of the mansion.

Many wondered with a propriety-chilled curiosity who she was and what she was doing there. Some of them, perhaps, imagined that she had come to sing or play. She first appeared hovering about the drawing-room door, hesitating, wondering whether she ought to welcome the guests. She discovered that no one afforded her a chance; that all stared at and then ignored her. Next she volunteered information to a lady who was inquiring the way to the dressing-room, and never will she forget the freezing look she got. After that, she resolved to depend upon some other means than her own for gaining a footing of ease with her guests — some other means which never materialised. Where all were supposed to be old friends and where so many considered the Misses Van Ness their hostesses, no one wasted a second thought upon her. In the course of fifteen minutes, which Laura afterward described as "an age," Henrietta came down from the upper floor and flew at her and bestowed a pecking, bird-like kiss upon her, saying with the ring of hard metal which distinguished her voice: "Splendid! splendid, you dear thing! You've managed it all so well — everybody's delighted." At that she was for winging away again, but Laura plucked her sleeve to detain her.

"I don't know what to do," she said. "I don't know any one."

"Why, yes, you do, dear," Henrietta replied. "There's Lily and Miss Martin and Macy Folger. Macy, you remember Miss Lamont, whom you met at Rhinebeck?"

"Oh, really," that young man stuttered, "quite well, of course. Awful bedlam, isn't it? Hate this sort of thing, till it gets on the track and runs smoothly, don't you? Nice old house this of Miss Van Ness's, I must say. Can I get you a cocktail, or anything?"

Then he went away, and Miss Lily came merely to say that Laura must be having a stupid time, but after the champagne had gone around a few times at dinner — " then's when things get comfy, don't they?"

Courtlandt Beekman was late in arriving. He knew every man and woman in the room, though his standing among them was formal, judging by the manner in which he greeted them as he passed from one to the other. A man who is at home in the wilderness sees more of what goes on around him, without appearing to look, than others can see by staring, therefore by the time he had reached Laura's side he comprehended her situation as well as if he had watched her for half an hour.

" You came to see the Russian minister," she said; " but he is not to be here. He could not leave his duties in Washington."

" I am not sure he ever thought of coming," Beekman replied. " I did not come on his account, Miss Lamont. You could not easily guess why I did come — especially since parties like this are quite out of my line, and I am hurrying — rather, I was hurrying — off upon a two years' tour of Central Asia."

"You are really going?" she inquired — and noticed a slight sinking of her heart as she awaited his reply.

"I did expect to start at once," said he; "but now I'm not certain."

He took Laura in to dinner, and sat next to her at table. Slowly he calmed her by his self-command that was so strong as to become a command of herself as well. Steadily, too, he raised her spirits with his flow of cheerful, bright speech.

"I was so uncomfortable," she confided to him. "I have been introduced to no one."

"Perhaps all do not understand that you are the hostess," he suggested. "As a guest, you would not be introduced. It is a monarchical trick which has struck root in this cranny of the republic — one of our imitations of the English. You are supposed to know every one; if not, there is thought to be a chance that the others might not care to know you. In this case this has its compensations, because, if you will excuse what is a rude thing to say, there is a strong chance that you are better off for not knowing the others."

XXII.

THE SKELETON AT THE FEAST

"They dealt out meat and they dealt out wine." — *Old Norse Song.*

THE dinner, which I am not going to describe, lagged a little at first, as doubtless Lily Van Ness would say might be expected, "until the wine went around a few times." During the repast, her sister produced from her pocket a half-sheet of note paper, much written on and rumpled, and conveying it deftly around the corner of the table to Mrs. Williger, whispered to her briefly. Mrs. Williger beamed with pleasure, consulted the paper surreptitiously for a moment, and beamed the more. Then she handed it to Mr. Bewick by her side and commanded him, aloud, "Read it and pass it along — only to the men." The men got it by turns, and each laughed aloud, or smothered a laugh as he passed it on, the women affecting no interest in it, except as it came the turn of each to hand it to her escort. One or two of the women turned scarlet, but nearly all were case-hardened against blushing. When it reached Courtlandt Beekman, he did not detain it.

"Mr. Beekman hasn't read it," purred the younger Miss Van Ness.

"I haven't my glasses with me," said he.

"He'd know it, anyway," said Henrietta, with a touch of malice. "Who knows but he wrote it? These quiet men are all so deep."

Beekman laughed, and, raising his glass, replied, "Your very good health, Miss Van Ness." Thus he ended that incident.

One other episode was a story by one of the ladies, for where all knew one another so well, the women exhibited the confidence and practice which raconteurs value.

"I was telling about the canny Scotchman at the club at St. Andrews," said the fair story-teller; "one we met there last summer. He told Myndert one day that he believed the awful 'heads' men get in the mornings, after nights like this, you know, are caused by tobacco, and not by spirits. 'Sperrets, mon,' he said, 'have the faculty — in a milder degree d'ye see

— of absorrbing essences and vapours, as ye well ken. 'Tis in that way parfumerry's mannifacthered.' Well, to drop the Scotch, he got Myndert to test this deep scientific question — one night's bout without cigars or pipes and the next night with them. Myndert's always wanting to know everything new, and he did have two awful nights. They each finished a bottle the first night, and, sure enough, though it was the best liqueur whiskey, Myndert came down to breakfast as good-natured as a lamb. He said he was as right as rain. Next night, he and the Scotchman drank only a little over a bottle between them, but smoked a lot, and in the morning after that, on my word, Myndert was an awful wreck; in the clutches of R. E. Morse, if ever a man was."

Nobody laughed but all waited, while the fair raconteur returned to her exercise with her knife and fork, in wonderment at the silence.

"Well, what's the point? Don't leave us suspended like that, Miss Daniels," some one called to her.

"Oh, I didn't tell you, did I?" she said. "Why, the point is that next day Myndert heard the Scotchman proposing the same experiment to another man. And it turned out that he was always getting some one to try the thing, so as to make sure of a rousing time every night of his life."

The climax was well received, and the story may stand as an example of what the company considered amusing.

Hardly had the laughter subsided when one of the men attracted general attention by exclaiming: "You don't say? My word! Well, that is a sensation!"

"What is it? Let us all in, please! What's the news?" several voices called.

"Why," the first speaker replied, "Bewick's been telling Margie Barclay that Clyde and Laura Stuyvesant and Dick and Mildred Mowbray are to get divorces and change partners. Clyde Stuyvesant is to marry Mildred Mowbray and Dick Mowbray is to marry Laura Stuyvesant. That is news, isn't it? Well, I will say it's only decent of them, anyway."

"Oh, we cling to civilised ways," Miss Daniels returned. "We still go through the form of marriage."

"Another double couple arranging to retire for three years, to purge themselves for merely carrying on a natural course on the hilltops, instead of hiding their ways under a bushel basket," one of the men commented.

"Three years!" a lady exclaimed. "How very out of date you are. The sentence has not been so long since 'way back when the Van Rips defied Mrs. Grundy. Nowadays, a year puts things straight."

"We are the true Latter Day Saints," Mr. Bewick soliloquised. "But I don't know; the Mormons achieve the same ends in better ways. They legalise and sanctify the very things for which we are damned by a moss-grown public opinion."

"Pshaw!" Miss Daniels exclaimed, "the Mormons have moral laws of some sort, however elastic, but we, very properly, consider ourselves above all laws. The moral law is for the poor and unfashionable. The rich and swagger are above the vulgarity of being damned."

"Still, we certainly are producing funny conditions," Mrs. Williger remarked, "if you look at them from the old-fashioned point of view. Now that Jacob Van Gilder has set up his new home with Lily Vesey, his daughters, who stay with the mother, call him Mr. Van Gilder, and speak of him as a person they were introduced to at Lady Curzon's while they were abroad. And then you've heard the story of the little boy with the new father, haven't you? No? It's simply too awfully clever! 'I've got a new father,' says a little boy to his playmate, proudly. 'Humph!' the other boy replies, 'you needn't be so big about it. It's only old De Vrees; he was my father first, I guess.'"

"Did you select the performers for to-night, Miss Lamont?" Beekman asked, in a lowered voice.

She did not understand him. She was not aware there were to be any performers.

"Oh, yes; I hear so," he said. "That Mlle. Saint d'Or, who created such a sensation while at one of the music halls, is one, and La Cachuca, the Spanish dancer, is to be the other. Have you seen them, or either of them?"

"I have never been to any of the variety theatres," she replied. "I'm practically alone, and my amusements are somewhat limited by necessity. Some of my married friends in town were going to get up a party to go to Weber and Fields's last winter, but it fell through somehow."

"Perhaps you won't care to see these performers. We — "

Had she waited for him to finish his remark with a proposal that they both enjoy a quiet talk, instead of witnessing the vaudeville performance, she would have replied differently, and spared herself the greatest of the mortifications of the evening. But she spoke quickly.

"Oh, yes, I should enjoy seeing them," she said.

After dinner, he left her to her own resources, being anxious that his attentions to her should not become marked. She fled to the sewing-room to relieve her complex feelings in the company of her mother and Tonette. There she told of the celebrated performers whom Miss Van Ness had engaged, and urged the old and the young lady to reconsider their determination not to participate in the festivities. All three presently descended to the noisy lower floor, where Laura again fell to superintending the servants.

While she moved about, Harold Kimball, who figured so unhappily in an earlier chapter in this history, attached himself to her side. He did so without encouragement from her, we may be sure. With an ardour spurred by too generous dining, he sang in her ear maudlin praises of her beauty. She tried to escape, but he, conscious of her design, determined not to lose this chance to pursue the acquaintance. Finally, cornered and fearful of a more trying scene, she stood and listened to what he had to say. Let it suffice that she found it torture to submit to his company under the circumstances. Though not every one present might have thought the case so serious, she was very much frightened. She had not known, and would not have believed, that a man would address himself to a lady as he did, with innuendoes so abhorrent to a pure woman, with a tone and glances which added insult to his disrespect.

"I was only telling her I would cut my dresses lower if I were so beautiful a woman," he explained to his affianced, when that wide-awake young woman saw Laura's face and pulled him away.

Laura went into the conservatory to compose her too-easily legible face. Kimball quickly disengaged himself from Henrietta and followed her — with a face that was also too scrutable. Beekman, who had seen the first part of the adventure and been unable to leave his companion of the moment, read Laura's face and then Kimball's, and he also went to the conservatory.

As he entered the long arcade, curtained again and again by palms, giant ferns, and delicate pendants of greenery, he heard the sound of Kimball's voice, a sudden rustle of Laura's skirts suggesting a note of alarm, and then her voice commanding Kimball to leave her at once.

"Miss Lamont! Oh, Miss Lamont! are you here?" Beekman called, advancing down one side of the conservatory, while Kimball passed out with uncertain step and sheepish look on the other side.

"Oh, Mr. Beekman," Laura cried, "I was so frightened!"

"Was," he replied, "but are not now. I was going to suggest that these performers are about to go on — if you really intend to see them. But before we go in, may I ask you about this vine? You may be surprised, but I have to interest myself in all things that have life, as well as many which do not, in order to travel intelligently. From men to mice, and from the trees to the mosses on their trunks, they are all the prey of the professional Ishmaelite who calls himself an explorer."

What was his magic, by which he could, as by a wave of the hand, restore a mind distracted as hers had been? Did it hide in the honest ring of his voice, or was it bred of that confidence which even his slightest movement disclosed? Laura asked herself these questions, and then admitted that she did not need to know the answer. Enough that she was certain of the magic, and was made calm while its spell lasted.

The performances of the dancer and singer took place in the dining-room, which had been cleared for the purpose. To Laura, whose innocence blinded her to its nature and purpose, — both traceable back to the ceremonies of forgotten heathen ages, — the dance seemed merely a movement in which rampant ardour displaced poetry and grace. The performance of Mlle. Saint d'Or — or what little she suffered herself to see of it — affected her differently. In a much less offensive form, pruned for the general eye and ear, it had served to startle the variety-hall habitues for a season. Here she sang and acted it as she would have done in Paris. It was a song in French, illustrated by pantomime. French was the language in which Laura thought and even dreamed, for she had lived her most impressionable years upon the Riviera. Therefore, only the newest slang and the unspoken suggestions escaped her comprehension.

"Ain't she horrid?" Tonette whispered to Mrs. Lamont.

"So like her father's taste," the old lady replied, loud enough for others to hear. "But I sha'n't interfere. I got nothing by opposing him."

"I fear I must be very old-fashioned," Laura said to Mr. Beekman, under her breath. "I must ask you to excuse me — for — really — I cannot remain."

"I tried to hint to you that this would be the case," said he; "but, of course, you could not understand."

Then she rose and slipped out with her too combustible cheeks aflame again.

On this night of pleasure to nearly all in that company, and of acute pain to her, the only other notable occurrence from Laura's point of view happened while she was again in the conservatory, this time with Henrietta Van Ness. At the same moment, Tonette and Mr. Beekman met in the passage leading to it, and the "Why, Mr. Beekman," followed by "What? little Tony?" told their own story of former meetings in a happy hunting-ground where Beekman and the Darbleys had often fared under one roof.

"So this is where you disappeared to," he exclaimed; "how did it all happen?"

"I met an angel and she took me with her," Tony said; "for Miss Laura is an angel; no better one ever grew wings; and this was heaven till it came to be the other place, just for to-night. I'll tell you what this all reminds me of — of that salt lick where you got the elk with the fifteen prongs. 'Twan't fair — you said so yourself — and this ain't no fairer. There was you and paw and Big Dan, up in the trees and on the rocks around the lick, and there come the elk — and got paw's bullet in his lungs and wouldn't die; and then got yours in the lungs and wouldn't die; and then got his hide all tore along the back, by Big Dan's whole magazine full of lead. Well, Miss Laura's at the lick, sure enough, and getting it in the lungs, and maybe in the heart, and all over. I tell you it ain't fair. I don't care if I am nothing but Rocky Mountain bred, we folks wouldn't take a woman's house and refuse to speak to her or 'sociate with her, and set up a hurdy-gurdy in her dining-room, and let men chase her, — say, here's more trouble. Don't go 'way, for heaven's sake."

"Pshaw!" Henrietta Van Ness was saying to Laura, "I was inclined to be vexed at Harry Kimball at first, — though, after all, he's simply taken too much wine, and would have been sorry for it in the morning, — but if you are going to exaggerate a pebble into a mountain and make a scandal, you will simply expose your manners, and we — I fancy we shall survive it."

Her tone was contemptuous. The words she employed were such as no man or woman could use in friendliness. Looking back at her, now, we can see that she had from the first intended only to make use of Laura, her purse, and her house, and then repudiate her obligation. She knew by experience that she could keep no friend of Laura's quality after her own was discovered.

"You are not just," Laura said, in her gentle way. "I should not have spoken of it even to you, had you not asked me. To you alone, I will say, also, that I would not have used you so ill as to expose you to such treatment."

"Humph!" from Henrietta.

"Nor should I have taken such a liberty as to bring into another woman's house such persons as those theatrical women."

"Oh, Lord!" Henrietta groaned, quite as if she had not expected to hear this fault found. "Your house is not so easily hurt. You loaned it to my friends, and their names are a sufficient guarantee of as good behaviour as any one's house calls for. But, really, I can see no use in your trying to quarrel, Miss Lamont."

"I am not quarrelling," she answered, truthfully. "You had something to say to me; will you please tell me what it is?"

"Tonette," said Beekman, "I do not like to stand here under the circumstances."

"No; please don't go," Tonette replied. "They're both loaded for bear, I tell you."

"Then we must go in, Tony," Beekman insisted. "I will not stand here."

"I merely meant to say that Cachuca and Saint d'Or want their money — two hundred and fifty dollars, I believe it is."

"I pay those women? Is it just to ask me to pay them, Miss Van Ness?"

"Oh, hello!" Henrietta said, as Beekman and Tonette turned into the conservatory. "You are very opportune, to-night, Mr. Beekman. Mr. Kimball has his own opinion, you may find, but Miss Lamont will be doubly grateful, I don't doubt."

"I hope for your approval, also, Miss Van Ness," Beekman remarked, as he turned to lead Tonette past the agitated girl and her assailant.

"Well, then," said Henrietta, "explain to Miss Lamont that when two theatrical people are engaged in her name and play in her house, they expect to be paid by her. If they are not paid, the private performance they are likely to give will cast their public one in the shade — you might suggest. You won't earn my approval if you succeed, Mr. Beekman, because it's nothing to me one way or the other, but you will end a very vulgar dispute, of which I am more than sick already."

She turned and left the conservatory with a sweep and stride which emphasised her eagerness to end the unpleasant work she had so elaborately planned.

"I hope, Mr. Beekman, that I have not been the cause of any misunderstanding between you and your friends," Laura ventured, apologetically.

"Oh, I don't think so," he replied, amused at the idea. "But, Miss d'Arblay suggested that I might be of service to you, and I shall be delighted if I can."

"To think of my being asked to pay those actresses!" Laura exclaimed. "I simply cannot do it."

"It is too bad," said he, "but I think Miss Van Ness spoke truly. Though you have been placed in a false position, you cannot expect them to consider any interests but their own, and the noise and scandal that will ensue, if they are not paid, will be even less endurable than the pain it will cause you to pay them."

"I do not care anything about the money," Laura said. "I have paid bill after bill of debts which have been incurred in my name without my authority — but this affects my self-respect."

"Oh, no; I don't think that," said Beekman; "it is an imposition — an advantage taken of your position. The real trouble, Miss Lamont, is that you have had no one to advise you as to the acquaintances you were making. I would have liked to do so, but it would have seemed presumptuous."

"I thank you, sincerely. But the end of it must come at some time, and now is the time. I have been disgraced by having those creatures in my house, and my right to protest against their having been brought here is lost if I pay them."

She was more angry and farther beyond self-control than ever before in her life.

"But, Miss Lamont, I doubt if there is any one else here except myself who would pay them if you did not."

"I cannot help it. Then they shall not be paid," said she, and turned her back, as if she had finally disposed of the matter.

Without betraying the impatience he must have felt, Beekman went to her side and argued with her. He told her that he had heard that she had become acquainted with the Van Nesses, then had met her in their company at the Rhinebeck wedding, and finally had seen that she was blindly entangling herself with them. Only through some lady, a mutual friend, could he convey a warning to her, but he knew no lady who was a friend to both, and was therefore helpless. As a last effort to aid her, he had, in a way, forced himself upon this party at her house with the full conviction that she would need a friend before the night was over.

" You call it friendly to advise me to pay and swallow this indignity ? " she interrupted, almost hysterically.

" I am nothing but friendly in advising you to end this whole miserable business as quietly and quickly as possible, swallowing a lesser indignity to avoid a greater, paying all the bills, and seeing the last guest out of your house with the bearing of gentleness and of immeasurable superiority which they must all have seen that you possess up to this point."

" I would rather die," Laura replied. " I did not believe you could offer such advice."

" Oh, Miss Lamont, do not say that," Beekman answered.

" I do say it. You would have me degrade myself," said she, passing the boundaries of reason into recklessness. " My mind is made up. I cannot with self-respect pay those women — and I will not."

She was so wrought upon as to be forgetful of herself, of her admiration for him, even to such an extent as to quarrel with him, or, for that matter, with every one.

As he searched his mind for new arguments, there was a bustle at the door, and a woman in the colours of a tiger-lily, followed by a foreign-looking young man, walked into the conservatory.

" I vant Mees Lamond," said she. " I vait and vait for zat money. For vhy I am no payt? "

" You shall have your money at once," Beekman replied.

" I forbid you to pay it," Laura insisted, almost tragically. " It must not be paid in my name."

" Please bring in the other performer," said Beekman, to the foreign-looking man, " and I will pay both at once. Miss Lamont, you are worn out with the trials of the day, and I strongly advise you to rest. The others who are staying here will sit out the night in the library. Do me the honour to let me act as your factotum in caring for their comfort."

"Mr. Beekman, you are presuming too far," Laura said, in a voice quivering with excitement. "Once again I forbid you to pay them. You have no right to manage my affairs — and disgrace me."

Scalding tears coursed from her eyes, and, out of shame for her weakness, she yielded to Tonette's pressure upon her arm, and went from the room, leaving Beekman to decide between risking her displeasure, or abandoning his course. He did not hesitate a second.

On the next morning, when the dust-bin was falling heir to the last vestiges of the entertainment, she gave orders that she was not to be called until her guests had gone from the house. Her servants made her acquainted with what went on meanwhile. Courtlandt Beekman remained until the last. He had an amusing interview with Mrs. Lamont, to whom he felt obliged to pledge his word that if he ever married it should be in the most complete and public manner.

Laura, waiting up-stairs, was tortured between the impulse to beg his pardon before he departed, and the silly inclination to maintain her position of the previous night. The knowledge that she could not justify her behaviour at that time was at the bottom of the unworthy impulse, of course. Shame and nervousness were still controlling her, yet she knew that when calm judgment returned she must admit her fault and apologise for it. While she debated with herself, a servant announced that Beekman had gone, leaving the following written message.

"MY DEAR MISS LAMONT: — I relinquish the authority I so unwarrantably usurped. One minor reason for my insisting upon paying those performers was that there was in the company one whom I suspect of being a furnisher of society scandals to the paper called *Society Talk*. Had those music-hall women made a scene, the result would have been a very unpleasant parading of your affairs in print. As it is, I do not see that anything worthy the attention of any scandalmongers has occurred. May I suggest that if you are hurt by anything which is published, you do not pay any public attention to it? Silence robs the sensational papers of the food by which they live.

"If I decide to go to Asia, I fear this must serve as my adieu. Very faithfully,

"COURTLANDT BEEKMAN."

XXIII.

ENTER: ONE OF UNSAVOURY REPUTE

> ". . . Thou wretch,
> Thou hast within thee undivulged crimes." — *Lear*.

LAURA quickly came to her senses. She had seen that Beekman was not to be judged with the Van Ness coterie, and that only a thin veil of politeness concealed his lack of respect for its members. She recalled that he had told her — when excitement had destroyed her correct perspective — that he had forced himself upon that company solely to serve her. Thus he had betrayed a peculiar interest in her — one which would flatter almost any reasoning woman who knew what rank he held among men. To say the least, he had offered her what she needed above all else in the world — strong, wise, masculine counsel. And she had parted with him in a tantrum, like a child. Over and over again, Henrietta Van Ness's sneering words rang in her ears: " You will simply expose your manners." The fear that she had done this developed into a conviction. Being good and honourable, she sorrowed over her injustice, her ingratitude, and the possible loss of Beekman's friendship, but I should not like to say how much more than all else this suspected "exposure of her manners" troubled her. I might be doing her an injustice.

"York says — " said Tonette.

"Oh, Tonette! How can you be so rude?" Laura exclaimed. "We who have known Mr. Stone a long while, almost intimately, never speak of him so."

"I asked him if he minded," Tonette replied, "and he said I could call him 'York' if it made me any easier. You sent me to him every day, to learn the flower business, and we could not help getting acquainted. And, anyhow, he called me 'Tonette' to-day. Well, he says, the only bad thing about this party is that you was obliged to quarrel with those Van Nesses, because you-all live so close together and they-all are as malicious as Satan. As for the rest of it, York — or Mr. Stone — says you've got to trust yourself and paddle your own canoe, and such a mess as that'll give you experience that's worth more than a year of preaching. I told him he would come near upsetting our apple-cart if I thought he was going back on you, but he don't act as if he meant to be ornery, and I just had to believe it was all for the best, though I'm so hot I lump Courtlandt Beekman and the Van Nesses, and the whole b'iling, all in together and don't never want to hear of any of 'em again."

The revelation of this intimacy between York Stone and Tonette would — only a few months before this — have been a severe blow to Laura. And even as it was, many another woman, hoping as she had hoped for a similar standing with her lieutenant, would have been hurt and angry with the buoyant-spirited girl. But the more Laura thought of the fact that Stone discussed her private affairs with Tonette while refusing to hear of them from her, the more she reproached herself. Her loss of self-control in Mr. Beekman's presence — her "blind and wicked pride" she called it — had greatly humbled her. Since that time she had taken to analysing her conduct, to prosecuting herself before the court of her conscience, and sitting in stern judgment upon her littlest weaknesses. Instead of finding fault with Tonette, she charged herself with possessing some serious fault or lacking some noble virtue, else so just and kindly a man as York Stone could not for two years have withheld from her what he so readily granted to a new acquaintance. She applied herself to a strict self-searching, in order to discover her fault. The task was hopeless, since the reason for Stone's conduct, only to be found in the laws governing the sexes, was as mysterious to mortals as the cunning of those flowers which reach down and press their pollen upon a bee's back in order that it may be carried to some distant mother.

There did appear in *Society Talk* a report of the Clock House party; one that made Laura and every friend of hers wince. Its purpose was to make an excuse for describing the dance of "Cachuca" and the acting of the Frenchwoman in a manner calculated to please the peculiar taste of that journal's readers. In order to bring out the more strongly the fact that both women gave performances free of most of the restraint they had shown before the general public, it was set forth that Miss Lamont and several of her friends retired from the room, one or two of them in tears, and all with scorched faces. However, the reporter honestly — and perhaps mischievously, as well — credited the party and the engagement of the performers to Henrietta Van Ness, and explained that the gathering took place at the Clock House because it had been borrowed for the purpose by Miss Van Ness.

The anger of the Misses Van Ness at this truthful presentation of the facts it is not our intention to describe. Their detestation of Laura Lamont, bred of their own shabby treatment of her, was not lessened, we may be sure, by this, which they considered a point gained over them.

How keenly Laura felt the hurt of the exposure we can only imagine, when we think how the occurrences thus made public wounded her when they took place. At times she felt like hiding herself from all who knew her, and at times like going to every friend she valued, with her own version of the case. While she debated what line of action to pursue, she found cause to admit that the ill wind blew her some good. This was because of the condolences which came to her by every post. As she read them she felt able to measure the value of most of the friendships she had formed.

I will not quote from the letters of her fellow members of the Beaux Arts Brotherhood, because all expressed deep regret at her having been so scandalously used by the Van Nesses, and her ill-fortune in having her name appear in the notorious chronicle of society scandals. Friendlier, more sympathetic letters she could not wish for. Eagerly she opened a letter whose envelope revealed Archie Paton's handwriting. Even more quickly she flung it aside, for it referred to her misfortune as something to have been expected, mentioned the Van Nesses as persons whom "other ladies had shown the good judgment to shun," and stated that he blamed himself for not having warned her that "her infatuation for the lacework of life must lead to just such catastrophes as this." Bryan Cross wrote to her on his new parsonage note-paper, a kindly letter, yet one through which she could see that he restrained a strong inclination to rebuke her for making light of his life-work. That was his characteristic way of putting it: not that her course contravened the moral law, so much as that it ignored his warning, as if he had copyrighted the moral law.

"You wrote me that my lectures made you uneasy, but that you could not honestly convict yourself of doing wrong. Dear Miss Lamont," he closed, "if you do not yet see, by what happened at your house, how surely and invariably the dedication of our lives to pleasure leads farther and farther toward excess, you even yet will grant that no such tendency can follow a life given over to healthy exercise, study, and a constant effort to bring the poor and rich back into brotherhood, failing which, disaster will invariably come upon us worst of all offenders, the Anglo-Saxon race."

To her surprise, even Courtlandt Beekman wrote to her — a short letter, yet one she thought worth keeping after many others had been thrown away: "It was," he wrote, "when I put myself in your place that I saw how cruel you must find that scurrilous publication. I sympathise with you sincerely. But there is another point of view — for the responsibility is rightly placed and you are made to appear in such a light that no one can read it without feeling for you the respect you deserve. Then, again, there is now such a Niagara of personal gossip and such exaggeration of whatever the more popular and the scandalous journals discuss, that, instead of any items of news being seven-day wonders, they are long-lived if they survive the time it takes to read them. Believe me, this will prove no more enduring."

The last of many more letters left her as the first had found her, unable to decide whether to put her face or her back to the world. She kept to the house while in this state of indecision, until the mere length of the seclusion rendered that her policy.

A sorely wounded creature it was who extended a scant welcome to her cousin Jack Lamont, when he was able to make the journey from New York. He had not seen her during her two years of unbroken enjoyment of her wealth and ease, and was forced to compare her with the credulous girl upon whom he had so cruelly tried to prey. Now that experience had developed her face, and care was, for a time, straining at it, he could scarcely believe she was the same person as that childish rustic of his memory — whom, perhaps, he had dreamed of pursuing again with other adventures, should he regain his strength.

In another book has been told the story of how this black sheep of the Lamonts had dealt with Laura when he discovered both her and the fact that she was heir to the great wealth of the head of the family then dying in the Clock House, and leaving no others so nearly related to him as Laura, her mother, — and Jack, whom he had disowned. Laura was completely ignorant of her good fortune, and, worse yet, was in what seemed to her a desperate plight. Her mother had been taken to a hospital, and she was as good as alone in the world. Her one desire was to see the lawyers through whom her father sent fortnightly remittances to her mother. Learning this, Jack Lamont undertook to guide her to their offices in New York, where she was wholly a stranger. He decoyed her to a loft in a business building in Twenty-third Street, and, by an arrangement with a friend of his own moral quality, locked her in there, vowing that he would confine and starve her until she consented to marry him. It was her only other relative, Archibald Paton, who rescued her.

Jack Lamont was of that contingent which we used to call the unprincipled or immoral, but which we now designate as decadents. By the time he was of marriageable age he had riveted himself to a course of living which made marriage seem bondage and full citizenship (for marriage and paternity are essential to that state, as well as to self-respect and manly pride) appear insufferable boredom. Few men in New York knew as many women as Lamont knew, or had known, when he was thirty-two. He spent half his life with the other sex, and seven-tenths of his fortune went out to them; yet the less said about them the better, except perhaps to remark that his affairs with them were the talk of the other morally dead bachelors in town for years.

He had moved for a dozen years in what may be called the underground life of New York, where all the people — with few exceptions — are mated, where not a woman among all of that sex is married, and where not a man is legally or formally bound to his mate. Nowhere, in an American book, has this underworld been described, and we have been led to believe it peculiar to Paris, Berlin, and Vienna, yet it is peopled by as many persons in New York as in any other one of the world's capitals. We see its members at the theatres, at the great restaurants, and on the uptown drives, and very many of us are sufficiently skilled to be able to detect the brand or hall-mark which they bear. No men or women are more stylishly or expensively clad, and they are a fairly well-appearing and well-behaving fraction; indeed, their comfort depends upon the closeness with which they imitate the decorum of the virtuous.

In this sub-cellar of society, among these rodents and rabbits of our species, the pervert Jack Lamont had been a dashing figure until drink and bad courses generally rotted his moral fibre and undermined his health.

At the time of his vicious adventure with Laura he was the subject of a very rare bit of gossip, for a companion, who had enjoyed his bounty when he was prosperous, had failed to cast him off, after the usual manner of her kind, when his money had gone. He was living upon the generosity of this weak, rather than wholly wicked, woman when he came as a guest to the Clock House.

In his turn he startled his cousin Laura. His cheeks were hollow, a feverish light was in his wandering eyes, his clothes hung loosely upon his frame. He was obliged to rest upon a sofa, after taking twenty steps from her carriage, and before he could be shown to his room. With her first glance all fear of him fled, with most of her former repugnance. Sympathy welled in their places. She was glad she had allowed him to come. His arrival, when she was so anxious for an excuse to stay within doors, seemed like an answer to prayer, and she was in a mood to bestow a wealth of care upon his restoration to health. She had prepared a spacious, well-appointed room for him, but the first pity-rousing sight of him changed her plans, and she hurriedly made ready her choicest bedchamber. Even that did not now seem good enough. In this best chamber, with a canopied bed on which he might shield his burning eyes, with heavier shades at the windows to keep the daylight in subjection, with a padded armchair brought from another room, — and all the servants impressed by her concern, — she surrounded the feeble man about town with a setting for a maiden as exquisite as Watteau ever painted. And then she pampered him with the choicest delicacies procurable by money, skill, and solicitude.

He had expressed his repentance for his past wickedness in a second letter, and she had sent back her forgiveness. That may have been with reservations and conditions: now it was unconditional and complete. Again, then, she was off her guard, trusting, wholly unsuspicious, and at ease, believing him unable as well as disinclined to do her injury. And he! débris of shattered principles, wreck of honour, outcast of virtue, worn in body and distempered in mind, surely, now, he appeared as incapable of mischief as his grateful and polite speeches to his benefactress betokened.

"I am so ashamed," he said to her; "I do not know how you can bear even to look at me."

"But I have forgotten everything," she said, bending over him and laying a gentle hand upon his shoulder. "We have only the future to think of now, your health and your comfort."

"I shall hope and try to make you really forget the past — as truly as you are good enough to make believe that you already do forget it."

XXIV.

THE WRECKING OF BRYAN CROSS

"Oh William, the dismal cell, the mournful sackcloth, the girdle with sharp points of iron, would be nectar and ambrosia compared to what I suffer." — *Sorrows of Werther.*

BRYAN CROSS deserved credit for more than appeared in his sermonish letter to Laura, because he kept out of it all signs of the mental distress he suffered when he wrote it. He had broken down in his pulpit, and his congregation had insisted upon his resting from his labours while they supplied another preacher in his place. Twice we have referred more or less vaguely to the doubts which had so long delayed his entrance into the ministry after he had otherwise fitted himself to labour in that field. Now that what was to be the climax of this phase of his character has begun its fell work, it is necessary to explain that his scruples concerned the very foundation of the Christian faith. In a word, he did not believe — or, at the least, he felt his faith to be insecure. Face to face with the moment when he should have suffered his father to put him in the list for preferment to a pulpit, his misgivings overwhelmed him, and he pleaded ill health, and a desire for rest in travel. Rest he never found, because wherever he journeyed he perplexed himself with the mental struggle which shifted him from faith to downright religious nihilism. His nature was too sentimental for him to rest satisfied with this last extreme.

In Germany, where men approach the ancient Greek attitude toward religion, where he found philosophy influencing every phase and crisis of life, where the Church holidays no longer bear an ecclesiastical stamp, and where love of Nature and of the Beautiful satisfies the higher cravings, Bryan fancied himself content for a time. But he discovered that this satisfaction came only in regarding these views as offering a compromise ground upon which one might revive religious interest where shopworn Churchianity had lost its hold upon his fellow Americans. He soon realised that if this were recommended as a means, he must yet look forward to the end — full faith at last. To preach that as a final resource for others, he knew he must begin with it in his own heart, and so he went adrift again.

The boast of the Japanese, who claim to have risen superior to every form of superstition, — as they call religion, — so startled and shocked him, especially when he realised the small, often superficial and largely imitative attainments of that midget people, that he derived hope from the mere strength of the revulsion. It was only when his father died and he was obliged to hasten back to take charge of the *Clarion* and of his invalid sister that he found comparative rest in new occupations and responsibilities. For a time he was able to abandon the struggle and busy himself with these other matters.

He accepted the call to the pulpit of the Knickerbocker Baptist Church when it seemed to him that the magic of his oratory and the zeal he had flung into his crusade against "dollar-worship" were sufficient for enduring success in any pulpit. He thought that to preach morality would answer. It did for a time, but one day a deputation of the officers of the church came to him to say that they had enjoyed "a wondrous feast of logic and a purging of latter-day humours, but they were hungering for news of God and His scheme of salvation."

"Give us a homely old-fashioned sermon on Calvary," they demanded.

He managed to conceal his disturbance and to reply briskly that he had been taking his own new ideas too seriously. They should have a ringing sermon, he promised, on the very next Sunday. The good men of the church went away delighted, unmindful how much of Bryan's instant acquiescence was due to his temperament and his readiness with speech or how difficult it was to weigh the words that he could charge so easily with his magnetism. But he knew himself, and crept away from them as Beekman's elk had gone, in Tonette's story, riddled and torn with shot. He went to the bedside of his saintlike sister to bathe in the calm of the chamber where Death had so long lingered, deliberate and in no haste. She was very weak, now, gliding out of her human state visibly at last. Yet, on the very edge of the gulf, she was the same Mabel whose eerie penetration had startled him a thousand times, and was now to shock him as never before.

"I knew you were coming," she said for greeting. "I seem to have been with you in your office at the church; were you not there with some men? I came with you all the way here to my bedside. Sit down, Bryan. Nurse, please leave us alone. Brother, I am dying at last. I shall be with you only a few days, and I have something of the utmost importance to say to you. I have dreaded it. I have hoped not to have to say it — to see a reason for doubting my own clear belief. Brother, I must say it at last."

His heart cried out within him. His guilt apprised him of what was to come.

"We have never held anything back from one another, Mabel," he said.

"Oh, Bryan," she moaned, fixing her searching gaze upon his face and struggling to rise to a sitting posture, "how can I say the words you have forced me to utter?"

As she continued to exert herself by pressing her elbows upon the bed he rose to assist her. He was too late. By a marvellous summons of her slight strength she lifted her body and sat up. Then she raised one dainty, lace-edged sleeve of lawn and pointed a pink finger at him with the gesture of a Fate, while a stern look that he had never seen there before came into her usually gentle eyes.

"You are a living lie!" she said. "You are a minister of a Christ whom you disown; oh, my brother, of a Saviour you despise! O God, when, in a few days, or it may be after the moment's space of oblivion which divides the dead from Doomsday, I stand beside our parents and tell them that their son and they are never to meet because he was an unbeliever — oh-h-h! Bryan, Bryan, what will they say?"

"Mabel, have mercy on me — and on yourself, too. You must not excite yourself like this. I —"

"Bryan," she insisted, "the hurt is in the agony I have suffered so long. Nothing but relief can come of my exciting myself to bring you back to the God of your fathers. You do not believe in God, Bryan."

"I do; I do, Mabel. On my honour, I have never doubted God. It is the hereafter — the future state, about which I have been so miserably tortured with misgivings. Even of that, dear sister, I only admit that I have misgivings; I will not say I deny. Oh, sister, pity, but do not condemn me."

" Bryan," she said, with an uncontrollable look of horror in her eyes, " what is belief in God without belief in His fatherhood, His eternal care and keeping, the salvation of the faithful which He charged upon His Son? I would have killed myself years ago, when I had such health as yours, had I not believed in these things, for what would have been the good of living? To have lost the faith you had as a child must have come by some effort, probably by the study of doubt. And yet I tell you from the grave's edge that the proof of Christianity is the ' ineffectuality and absurdity of disbelief ' which ' begins at nothing, leads nowhere, and cannot satisfy a good man or a reasoning mind.' Bryan Cross, put away your sophistry and come to the altar with me. Let me save you. Let that be the one great good of my poor life."

" I cannot, Mabel. I will not deceive you; I cannot. For years I have striven for it, but faith has eluded me."

The dying woman, saintly looking in any eyes and holy in his, clasped one of his hands and spoke to him as one inspired. From secular as well as sacred books, by proverb, by illustration drawn from great and little events in history and in their own experiences, by comparisons that missed neither the rotation of planets nor the growth of the humblest flowers, by fervid flights into the boundless enthusiasm of her own belief, she poured upon him a store of argument, example, ay, of what seemed proof, such as he had never heard and had never believed a human being could amass. Never preacher spoke like her — not Savonarola or St. Francis Xavier or Whitefield — because not one of them could have had the personality of one refined by Death yet still among the living; because none of these was a tender, loving, crystal-souled woman pleading with another self — as Bryan had always been to her.

"I want to — I long to believe," he wailed, sinking upon his knees at her bidding while she pleaded with the Almighty in his behalf as with the authority of a prophet.

The fevered interview ended as it began except that it left the invalid almost unconscious from exhaustion. It sent Bryan into the streets to walk like one pursued, blindly, at hot pace along the pavements, now muttering to himself, and at times lost even to his own consciousness, like one entranced.

Sunday found him with a ringing sermon prepared out of the echoes of the impassioned utterances of his sister during her assault upon his doubts. When he awoke and read the sermon over he was cheered by the conviction that every sentence vibrated with the spirit of unquestioning belief. It must prove all that was demanded by the congregation; it must thrill every believing heart, he thought. But on the way to church the notion that his sister's words would be but borrowed plumage began to worry him. The realisation that after living a lie he was about to emphasise his falseness, began to prey upon him. It was too late and he was too much disturbed to prepare another discourse, so he pushed on, dazed by the perplexities of his situation. He reached his private room in the church edifice, heard with dulled senses many exclamations of concern over his haggard appearance, and, at last, mounted the pulpit steps and sat down. The church swayed before his eyes and the people made a dull blur in front of him.

He delivered a prayer and gave out a hymn, then read another hymn — altogether mechanically. He was far less conscious of what he did than of the roaring confusion in his soul which said: "Preach it and find faith afterward." "Don't dare to preach it — liar! coward!"

At last came the time for the sermon. He thought he had put an end to his trepidation, and, summoning the temper which so well-trained an orator can always command in greater or less degree, he plunged into the discourse. His words rang, whether with true feeling or in mere obedience to his art we know best, and the spellbound audience deemed itself the most fortunate body of worshippers in the land that morning. But this was only during the beginning, the first third of the sermon. Finally, it was his part to command the people to shout the words: "I believe; I believe!" and for him to repeat the declaration after them, on his own behalf. This his sister had done, or had asked him to join with her in doing, and he had foreseen the dramatic effect this would have in the pulpit.

"Shout it!" he cried, "as the people shouted before Jericho."

"I believe," they shouted twice. Then every eye met his, and all awaited his response.

It was thought that he staggered as the disturbance of the air rolled like a billow against the pulpit. There was a long pause. The people saw him close his eyes and open and close them again. They saw him moisten his lips with his tongue. But they could not see or even suspect his agony. A voice was roaring in his ears: "Do not dare to say it."

"Now, hear me," said he — but in how strange a voice, that began huskily, then broke, then ended in a treble.

He never made the declaration. He saw his sister's face appear between him and the people, shadowy, wavering, with horror depicted upon it. He clutched the pulpit-rail and swung backward, then caught himself and, lurching forward this time, fell like a half-emptied sack across the pulpit.

The deputation that visited him at his home on that night announced that the congregation had voted him a long holiday. They found themselves obliged to deliver their message briefly, for Mabel Cross was dying and their pastor had to be led from the death-chamber to see them. The long-suffering woman died in such a stress of gentle grief at parting with him in the midst of his doubts that he was inclined to charge himself with having killed her. The final scene in her short life, which had been one unbroken calm, was almost violent, so intense was his grief and so deeply agitated were her last moments.

Bryan was confined to his bed when the funeral took place and for days afterward. As a long sea-voyage was recommended, he decided to set out upon a trip to England and thence to Australia. Among the many who came to bid him farewell when he was about to start was Laura Lamont, to whom he was so effusive in his greeting and complimentary in all that he found to say that she marvelled why she had never suspected the depth of his regard for her. Twice, when she rose to go, he begged her not to hurry, and when, at last, she felt obliged to leave him, he held her hand and kept his hold upon it until she reached the door. Stranger still, he refused to say "good-bye."

"I have a feeling that I shall see you again before I get away," he explained.

His appearance and manner left the impression of impending death, and she could not resist the thought that his behaviour strengthened this unwelcome foreboding.

She had not been at home in Powellton two hours when his card was sent up to her. She went to him in the drawing-room with wonder in her face and surprise in her greeting, but he replied to her quite as if it was customary to begin a subject in one part of the State and finish its discussion in another. In truth, the matters he at once began to broach were those which had filled his mind in New York, yet had not there been touched upon.

"My heart is not dead, Miss Lamont," said he. "It is only stunned. It will be as warm and sensitive and will respond as eagerly as before to whatever appeals to it when I am stronger and the shock of all that has happened wears off."

"I am sure you will soon be yourself again," she replied; "but why have you come so far in your weak condition? It is not wise."

"Do you believe in the Christian faith?" he inquired. "Wait, please; I mean have you complete, unquestioning faith — in all of it — in every declaration of the creed as you repeat it in church every Sunday?"

"Why, yes; surely I have; of course. How can you ask it?"

"Did you never feel the slightest doubt about —"

"I never knew a doubt of any iota of it, Mr. Cross," Laura answered. "I do not think I could be brought to doubt a word of it. More than that, do you know that I never can believe any man or woman sincere who says he or she is an unbeliever."

Bryan heard her to the last word and then sat, for an instant, staring at her. His mouth twitched nervously and an unusual, unnatural light shone in his fevered eyes.

He sprang forward and grasped Laura by both her wrists, towering over her as she sat, startled and alarmed, in her chair.

"Then give me the secret, do you hear?" he thundered, in the tone that had set a hundred great audiences quivering. "Tell it to me — the secret of your faith. Tell it to me — quickly, or I shall go mad. How dare you mock me with your boasting, and deny me the right to share your faith?"

"Mr. Cross, release me," Laura bade him, as she struggled up from the chair, and, finding that he did not oppose her, moved toward the door. "You are ill and yet you should have known that you could not govern yourself."

He seized one of her hands, stayed her departure gently, and flung himself upon his knees at her side.

"No, no," he cried, with a broken, a pitiful voice, "for God's sake, do not go. Do not leave me. Have mercy on me. My unbelief has goaded me for years; it is driving me mad, it killed my sainted sister. Give me the key to your faith, tell me, — oh, as you hope for mercy in the hereafter — tell me how to believe — how you believe. I do not command you. Forgive me my rudeness. I want to be gentle. See, now, how humbly I beg you for only just a little light. You can save my soul, Miss Lamont. If there is a hell you can pluck me from it. Won't you? Won't you, dear Miss Lamont? Oh, as you love your God, have pity on me."

"Please rise, Mr. Cross," she said. She now had no fear of him; instead, his misery roused all her sympathy. "Please rise. I will do my best to answer you. I also have known moments — not of disbelief or downright doubt — but of questioning and confusion. Always, I have gone upon my knees and bared my soul in prayer, and God has manifested Himself, filling my being with an unutterable calm, with a certainty in His glory, with full confidence in His littlest promise."

"But how? How did you pray? What state of mind, what form of words, what method brought this peace? Tell me! Keep nothing back. You say you found God, but so do millions like you. How found you Him? tell me or I must die like a dog — a mad dog, a mad dog, I say."

He still held her hand. He still riveted his burning gaze upon her eyes. He gripped her flesh to punctuate his speech.

"How?" Laura replied. "Why, I approached Him as my mind saw Him, walking tall and fair as a god among the lowly, or hanging on the cross and looking with sad and pardoning eyes upon the cruel world that tore and mocked Him — yes, even as a babe in the arms of His mother I invoked His — "

"You fool!" Bryan thundered, flinging her hand from his; "you can tell me nothing — for you know nothing. You mock me with your parrot talk. Ah, God! I might have known it. Your faith is ignorance, your belief is in words and familiar pictures. God *is* because a book says so. Christ was a saviour because Murillo painted Him as a babe. Do you think I am to be satisfied with mere empty words? You neither think nor know. To have faith, according to you, is to be a baby or a fool. Great heaven, what shall I do? To whom shall I go? Does any one know God? Does any one anywhere possess intelligent belief? Can any man say where or how I shall find an Almighty?"

Even while he was speaking, he was moving swiftly toward the door. Once there he dashed out of the room.

Laura sank into a chair nerveless, almost exhausted, and needing time to recover both mentally and physically from her amazing experience. Never before had she witnessed pure passion in any form. It left her as a terrible clap of thunder leaves any one of us.

In five minutes — or ten at the most — the door opened and Bryan Cross came slowly and feebly back to her side.

"I was mad," he said. "Was I brutal? Is any apology sufficient to gain your forgiveness? Oh, Miss Lamont, I am beside myself; and I am, oh, so miserable."

"You should govern yourself, Mr. Cross," she answered, gently. "I would rather see you calm and reasonable than hear you apologise. What do my feelings amount to beside such excitement as you allowed yourself to suffer?"

Bryan Cross uttered a groan.

"My heart is like a leaden thing in my breast," he said; "and my head seems half wooden — or half gone. That is natural when one has suffered so, isn't it?"

"I am sure it is," she replied, quite ingenuously; "you have a constitution that will re-assert itself. Your loss seems terrible, now, but you must recollect that your sister's sufferings are over."

"Miss Lamont, I am so afraid," he said. "I am like a little nervous child in a dark wood. I am full of alarm. I hardly dare go abroad by myself. In the thickest crowd, in the brightest light, even when I should feel safe, in my bedroom at home, I am afraid."

"Afraid of what, Mr. Cross?"

"Oh, you do not know — I cannot tell you," he said. "I'm just afraid — to be with myself — to be so helpless and alone. I clung to Mabel as to the better part of my life. And she has gone — gone — denying me her love before she went."

"Oh, I know better than that," she replied, cheerily, "she loved you with her whole heart, for she told me so."

"There were things between us of which she couldn't tell you," he said, plaintively; "but, anyway, I am alone now — and so afraid. Miss Lamont, I want to ask you to be what she was to me; to love me, to let me lean on you in my misery and be buoyed up by your goodness when I'm strong again. I ridiculed your faith, yet I know you are wholly good and very close to God. Won't you let me live my life beside you? From you I would gain faith. Won't you? Oh, please don't deny me."

"But I — I respect you very much, Mr. Cross. I admire you and wish to be your true friend, always, but — you must not ask for more. It cannot be, and why should you grieve me and cause yourself more suffering?"

"You do not pity me?"

"Oh, I do; really, I do. But—"

"You will not marry me?"

"I cannot, Mr. Cross. You are not well—not yourself. You scarcely know what you are saying."

He regarded her somewhat blankly, as one who looked through her far into the distance. Then he drew himself together, and rose to his feet.

"I might have known it," he said. "I may have been too clumsy to succeed, but I knew you would not be my wife. And yet, oh, God, what that a man has, or can do, or get, would I not promise if I could have you, with your pure faith, by my side, to give me courage through life?"

He would not stay even to rest, but was off almost as quickly as before.

XXV.

LOVE AND A ROBBER BOTH BREAK IN

> "So they grew together
> Like to a double cherry." — *Shakespeare.*

THE blandishments of town in winter were again proving irresistible to Laura, but her own greatest society effort had left her too sore to stray beyond the small and early, family-like meetings of the Beaux Arts Brotherhood. She was seeing, besides, a great deal more of the pleasures of a staid set led by lawyer Shipton's wife, a set that went in for courses of lectures and readings, for whist, and for afternoon chats over tea and cake. The Egerton-Woods, at whose dinner parties the walls were hid under roses; the Mowbray-Stantons, who had Paderewski in to entertain them, unless there was some greater artist-lion obtainable, saw no more of her than the etiquette of afternoon calls demanded; for, if she was not convinced that those who assailed Pleasure Living were right, she was, at least, not certain that they were wrong. A great deal of her time was spent at home, planning the spring and summer campaign for the advantage of the poor of Powellton and Wapata, and in riding from house to house and village to town upon this business, with Tonette on horseback beside her carriage.

On one bright, sunny day there sounded the report of a pistol beneath her bedroom window. Before she could reach the window, another loud explosion shook the air. She saw the servants running out of the kitchen door, and in a moment Tonette and Jack Lamont appeared walking toward the house, Tonette with a large revolver in one hand, smiling and talking, and Lamont looking rather more than usually grave.

" So you see, it won't do to get funny with me," Laura heard Tonette say to him; " a girl who can get along without any man's help can manage to do without any man hurting her."

Laura drew back from the window, so as not to be seen, and presently sent for Tonette. She proved to have little to say.

" Well," she said, " you know he got so funny, once before, that Miss Johnson had to make a fuss. I didn't mean to make any. I meant to teach him something quietly. Oh, it wasn't much. I didn't slap his face or scream or anything; only got my gun, and asked him out to take a walk in the garden; nice as pie, I guess he thought I was. 'We can talk more quiet there,' I says. He took the bait like a trout under the ice. When I got as far from the house as I thought I could, I took out my gun and showed it to him. I merely says, 'This is what I carry for any one that thinks I don't know my way about. For fear you may think I ain't used to a gun,' I says, 'I'll show you.' With that, I asked him to notice a twig on a bush about thirty feet ahead, and I shot it off and handed it to him. Then I took a cent and threw it up and shot it somewheres into the next county. 'Now,' I says, 'we can be good friends, because we've seen that each of us can bite, and you know whose bite is the worst.' Oh, he's all right, Miss Laura. I'm very sorry the gun made such a noise."

By this we see that Jack Lamont was mending, and coming rapidly to feel like himself again. Laura got very little of his society, for he still ate his meals in his room, and seldom entered any other part of the house except to reach his own quarters. He had been able to enjoy short daily walks for ten days or more, and, though York Stone said nothing of it to Laura, that shrewd observer knew that the invalid had visited the village hotel several times, had made some barroom acquaintances, and had enjoyed more than one game of billiards.

It was unfortunate that, though Laura had reason to plume herself upon having the protection of a man who was nearer at hand than those in the servants' wing of the house, her cousin failed to be of service when a robber broke in and gave her a dreadful fright.

It was the second of a remarkable series of burglaries. They proved, in time, to be so uniform in their very unusual characteristics that, at first the neighbourhood, and finally the New York press, pitched upon them as a theme of the greatest interest of the moment. In time the perpetrator of these crimes became nationally notorious under the nickname of "the Flash-Light Fiend."

His first visit was paid to the house of the manager of the carpet-works at Wapata. He selected a night when that person, who was a widower, had gone to New York, leaving the house and servants in charge of his daughter, famed in that countryside for her great beauty. The so-called "fiend" woke the young lady, and, after taking a finger-ring and brooch of trifling value, produced a blinding light and declared that, by its means, he had taken a photograph which he should treasure with his other keepsakes as long as he lived. His politeness and pretence of consideration for his frightened victim were exploited in the press in heroising reports of what he said and did during his nefarious visit. The same evidences of his misused good-breeding were never missing from any of his subsequent exploits, which were invariably carried on in the apartments of young unmarried ladies for petty gains to which, with mock gallantry, he ascribed a sentimental value.

Laura Lamont, as I have said, was his second victim. She was awakened toward daylight one morning by the light pressure of a man's hand upon her mouth.

"Do not cry out," he whispered. "On the word of a man of honour, I will not hurt you unless you scream. Attempt that and I must kill you, for murder is less to me than the danger of exposure. If you promise to be perfectly quiet, press my hand."

The terrified woman gave him the required signal of obedience. He at once freed her mouth, and sat down by her bedside.

"I will take your photograph in a moment," said he, "that I may always be able to recall the most exquisite of beauties, as I have seen her, like a queen in the old days of France, holding a morning levee in her chamber."

A blinding flash came with the last word he spoke, and when she opened her eyes she was alone. She was fearless to the point of folly, and her courage had never failed her as it did in this instance when she promised not to cry out. This was not to be wondered at by those who consider that she awoke, suffocating, to realise a plight sufficiently terrible to make imagination swell alarm. The instant she reopened her eyes after the flash, she leaped from her bed, with her courage full upon her again, and lighted the gas. After satisfying herself that the burglar was not hidden in her bedchamber, she ran out into the passage, and into Tonette's room. It took time to rouse the young girl, and Laura rang the chambermaid's bell violently while waiting for Tonette to come to her senses.

"Wake Mr. Lamont," said Tonette.

"Why, of course," Laura exclaimed, and ran to her cousin's room, turning on the electric lights in the passage as she went. So much time was lost in rousing him that Tonette, clinging to her revolver as the last relic of her Rocky Mountain experience, was searching the ground floor rooms before he could be made to understand what had happened. At last he was heard to leap out of bed, calling out that he would dress as quickly as possible, and Laura ran back to slip on a wrapper, and catch up with Tonette. Before Lamont joined the others, the butler and the chambermaid had swelled the searching party. When he did appear, Lamont almost angered Laura by what she took to be cowardice. He held back, wasted time in arguing that the burglar must be miles away, begged the women not to risk their lives, lamented the likelihood that he was taking cold, and, in a sentence, behaved like an arrant poltroon. A back window, wide open, in the servants' wing, appeared to explain the burglar's mode of entrance and of exit, but no other sign of him or of his work was discoverable.

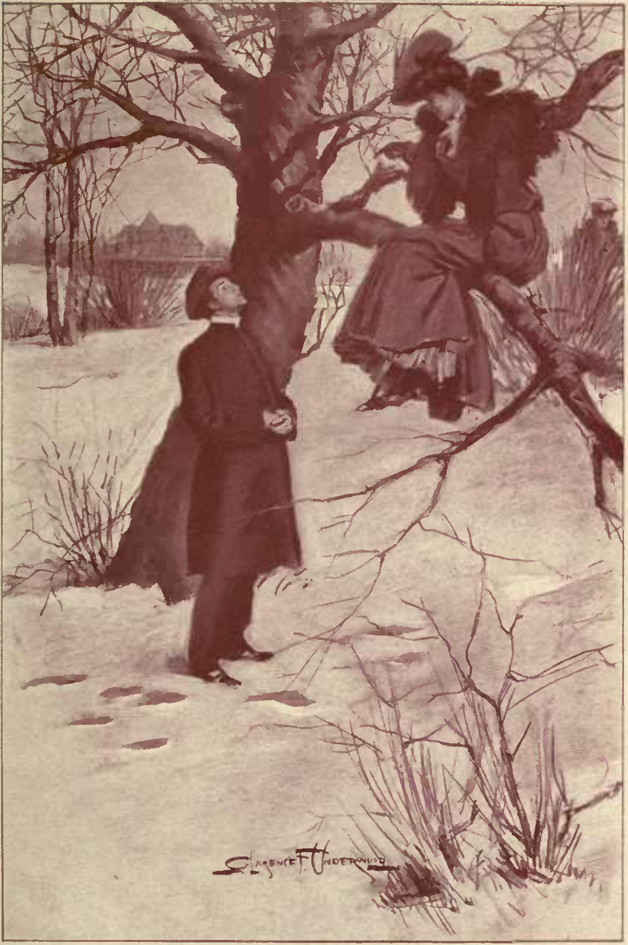
Strict orders were given to the servants not to mention the occurrence in the village, but it got into the newspapers in twenty-four hours. One who had not already suffered an exposure of her private affairs would have been loth to see herself once pilloried before the impertinent public, whereas Laura's horror of newspaper gossip had become almost morbid since the "Society Talk" paragraph appeared. We are told by the press how grand a bulwark of freedom we gain by its liberty, we read that the new force, publicity, is the terror of the wicked and the tower of the virtuous, but when our most intimate affairs are noised upon the winds, to be blown into every stranger's house and to litter every empty mind, we form our own opinion of the new force. Vainly we try, as Diana did before the reporter Actæon, to recover our privacy's vesture or to plunge into some screening thicket — but the new rays penetrate apparel, verdant fastnesses, even the rock walls of our home castles which the law itself may not enter without written order of court.

In this case, the news of Laura's adventure leaked or, rather, flowed into the New York newspapers in exaggerated articles capped by screaming headlines. Her friends traced the betrayal to Lamont, and he admitted having talked of it at the hotel, never dreaming, he said, that his cousin would object, or that the reporters would hear of it. The gossip concerning the Van Ness party was revamped, and one newspaper illustrated its broadside with a picture of the bedroom, drawn from imagination, and showing the flashlight fiend seated by the bed's head conversing with his victim. Of this triumph of enterprise Laura could only say, from the depths of her gentle nature, that she prayed Heaven to spare every journalist concerned in its production from ever feeling or appreciating the moral agony, the shame, and the torture to which it subjected her. She avoided the newspapers as if she had come to imagine the press an engine devoted to her destruction. She wept bitter tears and clenched her teeth in desperate resistance to her helplessness.

The Rev. York Stone came handsomely from the shell of his reserve at this juncture, to yield sympathy and shrewd observation. In homely gossiping comment upon her private affairs he proved as clear and vigorous as in his business counsel. Though quite as sturdy and confident as before, there was now a new note of gentleness in his tone and views, one that found warm response in her sensitive nature. Moreover, he gave her his attention so unreservedly that no topic was too trifling or too close to her private concern to engage his interest. As if spurred from the depths of his broadened sympathy, he came more frequently to the Clock House to sit in pleasant converse with her and her mother and Tonette. Laura was indeed proud to abandon the idea that it had been through some fault in her own nature that he had behaved so differently in earlier days.

She was quite alone on one bright afternoon. Her mother was asleep in her own room. Tonette was — somewhere — she did not trouble to ask or wonder where, and she was hoping that Mr. Stone might happen in, as indeed, his habit justified her in fancying that he would. It had not often been the case that both Tonette and her mother were absent when he called. This, perhaps, caused her to be a trifle impatient, and, to speed the passage of time, she put on a knitted tam-o' shanter cap, drew it snugly down over her ears, and went out into her park to walk — always with the front gate in sight, as it happened. At a moment when she had turned a corner of the curving drive and had put a mass of evergreen bushes between herself and the snow-clad lawn, she heard a burst of girlish laughter and the crunching flight of more than one pair of feet. Through the bush she saw Tonette in full flight, skirts lashing, arms bent up from the elbow, eyes gleaming, mouth open and cleaving the air with shouts.

After her came the Rev. Mr. Stone, one foot far before the other, sliding, clerical coat-tails skimming the air, one arm reaching far out toward the hoyden, lips parted in an extensive grin and eyes flashing like the girl's. He caught Tonette and both fell upon the snow. With the quickness of a wild animal, she wrenched herself free and rolled over and over out of his reach. Was Laura dreaming, or did she actually see the young rector rolling, in similar defiance of all dignity and decorum, after Tonette? Alas! there was no doubt of it. And now Tonette was on


Clarence F. Underwood

"SHE SAT SWINGING HER FEET AND LOOKING DOWN AT MR. STONE"

her feet, shaking the snow off her skirts, dancing tantalisingly beyond Stone's reach and crying out:

"I'll never — never — never! Shame on you; a clergyman, too! A high old clergyman, you! Why don't you chase your own sheep? You're not my shepherd yet."

"Tonette! Everybody'll hear you. Come to me, I say," commanded the rector.

"Will you behave?"

"What I want to do *is* behaving," he replied. "Anyhow, I sha'n't give up."

"Got to catch me, then," said Tonette, and ran again — straight toward Laura. Beside the evergreens, behind which Laura stood riveted with astonishment, was a tree with low branches. Tonette seized one of these and lifted herself upon another, on which she sat swinging her feet and looking down at Mr. Stone with her back toward Laura, who crept guiltily and swiftly along the drive and out of hearing, with what mixed emotions we may imagine.

"There!" Tonette exclaimed, "I've torn my dress. Oh, dammit — ty, dammitty, dammitty, dam — "

"Tonette! Tonette!" cried the young clergyman. "Why do you talk like that?"

"I want to be deuced smart, and all that sort of thing, don't you know?" she replied, mocking the speech of our Anglomaniacs.

"You only do it to hurt me," said he.

"No, not at all. Fancy your thinking that! I was only giving a rotten imitation, in a beastly sort of a way, of your very swaggah friends, the Van Ness sisters."

"They're not my friends. I scarcely know them," Mr. Stone replied. "They happen to be my parishioners, but I am bound to say I never heard them use bad language."

"Oh, well, I have, then," said Tonette; "I've heard them twice out of the only three times I ever saw them. The other day when I was in Bontecou's drug store, Henrietta was there, taking a good big nip out of a bottle, which she called for by saying, 'I want some — er — you know,' and her sister came in and said, 'I ain't ready, yet. I've had a lower regions of a time trying to get the hairpins I want' — only she did not say 'lower regions.' She said the same thing in one short word. Shall I tell you what it was? — I do so want to talk like your 'ristocratic parishioners."

"Won't you, please, stop, Tonette?" the love-smitten clergyman pleaded. "Just to oblige me, won't you be your dear, sweet little self?"

"Oh, but York, really, I ain't good enough as I am; I've got to act like I was some one else; drink and swear —"

"Tonette, what has come over you?"

"Nothing hain't," said she, allowing the light of love to kindle in her eyes — and set ablaze the same spark in his tender heart, we may be sure. "I'm only teasing you, and you know it; you — you — well, I won't say what you are. At least, I can't holler it, but I'll whisper what I think of you when I get down."

Laura now slammed the gate, and came boldly down the path to give double warning.

"Come down; here's Miss Lamont," she heard Mr. Stone command in a sepulchral whisper.

"I'm not afraid," Tonette replied, in a ghostly voice, to mock him. "My conscience is clear. You better skeedaddle."

So Laura was obliged to keep on in her course and to openly discover the reckless girl in the tree, swinging her feet dangerously near Mr. Stone's breast, while he stood, snow-splotched from shoulders to toes, staring foolishly up at her.

"Why, Tonette!" Laura exclaimed.

"Please make York go 'way," Tonette called back.

"Do come down, Tonette — please," he urged; "do get down."

"Go 'way, you goose," she whispered; "don't you see I never can get down while you're there?"

Stone therefore advanced and, with his back to Tonette, broke what he called the news:

"Miss Lamont, I have asked Tonette to be my wife."

"Why! I am —" Laura stopped there, without saying what she was — while Tonette slid down and came and hid her face on Laura's breast.

"It's true, Miss Laura," she said, "but it is to be as you say."

"You love one another?" Laura asked.

"I love her," said Mr. Stone.

"I'm tired er bein' pestered so," said Tonette.

"Well, this is a great surprise to me," Laura said, taking one of each of their hands; "I can have nothing more to say than to give you my congratulations — my two best friends."

She led the way into the house and ran into the library, where she left them while she went to her room and sat and looked into the grate fire with fixed eyes, as if the leaping flames and shiftings of the glow of the coals were flashing a sobering message to her. A moving message, too, for, after a few minutes, tears came to her, and she rose and flung herself across her bed and cried away the shock of this new revelation which so accentuated her own loneliness.

XXVI.

BEEKMAN SCORES A FAILURE

"How absolute the knave is." — *Hamlet.*

LATER in the afternoon the love-stricken clergyman called, and in a manly, straightforward manner told her of his love for Miss Tonette, and how long he had fought against it, because to have yielded seemed certain to interfere with his usefulness as a clergyman devoted to the poor. But, he said, he could not silence the pleadings of his heart, and when about to confess his love to the maiden he saw that she loved him in return. They had discussed the future soberly, and Tonette had disabused his mind of the fear that marriage would interfere with his life-work. Both she and he had written to her father for his approval, and there would not be a single cloud on their horizon if only Miss Lamont would give them her consent. It was a simple and a very naïve story, and when it was finished Laura said:

"I know you both, and admire you both so very thoroughly that I can truly say I envy each of you the other's love and the happiness you will bring to one another."

Their conversation led to a renewal of the discussion over the purchase and new management of the village tavern, Laura having opened the endless dispute by saying that, as a married man, York could not possibly connect himself with the enterprise lest his wife should suffer along with him the mistaken opposition of the narrower-minded ones among his parishioners. The clergyman held the contrary view that the dignity of wedlock would make him wholly secure against all scandal.

In the course of the argument Courtlandt Beekman was announced. He had read of the operation of "the Flashlight Fiend," and believed that if he visited Miss Lamont he could, in some unforeseen way, be of great service to her in connection with that scoundrel.

Laura dismissed Mr. Stone, and went to the drawing-room to receive Mr. Beekman.

"Oh, I am so glad you came! You are the very man to advise me," Laura exclaimed, as she returned the grasp of his hand.

It was on the tip of his tongue to say, "That was what impelled me to come," but he restrained the impulse.

"We are discussing my prospect of buying the village tavern, and managing it in the interests of order and decency," she said, "but though the subject has come up between the Rev. Mr. Stone, our rector, and myself at least a score of times, he always insists that he should manage the reformed saloon, whereas I persist that he cannot with propriety do so — and there we come to a block, every time."

"Tell me all about it, please," Beekman said, concealing his disappointment that the matter in dispute was not what he had imagined.

She told her story in detail, giving the tavern its true colouring in her picture, and explaining how seriously and persistently it interfered with the complete reformation of the village.

"There are two courses open to you," said Beekman, when her recital ended. "You can tear down the present tavern and build elsewhere — in a shady grove, by preference, a first-class road-house. The place will then tempt a responsible man, skilled as a caterer, to take charge of it.

To it (if it has attractive dining-rooms, a bowling-alley, a billiard-room, and a good chef) will come a constantly increasing number of persons who live within a radius of ten or a dozen miles to end their drives with a supper or dinner, and to relieve the monotony of country cottage life with a change of fare and scene. You could arrange that the man in charge be paid a salary for managing the bar and that he earn a commission on every sale of tea, coffee, cocoa, and temperance drinks of every sort which he might sell, giving him also all that he took in from the restaurant — he providing and cooking the food."

" Why, that is very attractive. I wonder what the alternative course will be," Laura remarked.

" The first plan is open to this objection," Beekman went on, " that it will cause the rich patrons of the place to serve as bad examples to the people of your village, who will know that the others drink what they please and sometimes too freely. Another bad thing about the plan is that your villagers will know that the wealthy visitors are not urged to take temperance drinks, as they are. That will offend them, and even stir them to drink more alcohol than they would take were all the customers treated alike."

"I can see that, of course," Laura broke in.

"The alternative plan is the better one, I think," said Beekman. "That is — why, who is the — I beg your pardon, I did not mean to be so rude."

While he was speaking he saw a shadow fall across the window, and, looking out, perceived Jack Lamont standing on the front porch, preparatory to stepping down into the garden.

"How you startled me!" Laura exclaimed. "Do you know him? That is my cousin John Lamont — an invalid, who is here in an effort to regain his strength."

"No, again I beg your pardon. I do not know him. I think he must have startled me, also," Beekman replied.

To himself he said: "That is the man who has brought me here."

"The other plan," he continued, "is to put the present tavern in the charge of a man on a salary, with a commission, in addition, upon all non-intoxicating beverages he is able to sell. That is the plan of the English reformers, and it works excellently well. He should be warned that he will be dismissed if he sells liquor to a drunkard or a minor or keeps his place open after hours. He should be obliged to provide food in simple forms in the barroom, and he should be in sympathy with the purposes of his employers."

"Excellent! Excellent!" Laura cried.

"Yes, but not wholly so," Beekman answered. "Whatever else you do, if you buy out the present saloon-keeper, he will start another place as near by as possible. You cannot buy the whole township to keep him out, you know. He will have the politicians behind him, and he and they may make a great deal of trouble. It is far better to avoid all chance of that. For my part, I would hope to decrease his business by my own efforts, and then to win him over to accepting a salary and doing as I desired. Whenever you think the time is ripe, if you will let me know, I will see and talk with him, and I believe — for I have seen the man, and do not think his sins have any deeper source than a hard struggle to live — that I can convert him to becoming a valuable lieutenant of yours, especially if you will be courteous and friendly in your manner toward him."

"Thank you. Thank you ever so much," Laura said, warmly. "Mr. Stone and I have been dreaming and planning dreams. I will certainly ask you to help me, since you are so kind as to make the offer."

"Miss Lamont," said Beekman, rising to take his departure, "no, I must go. I have important business in Fishkill, which I may as well transact now that I am so near. Miss Lamont, it is not in any such trifling way as this that I would be of service to you, if I could, if — if you would encourage me; but in every way, always, if I might have the good fortune to earn your confidence."

"Oh, Mr. Beekman," Laura said, feeling the depth of meaning which his tone, more than his words, disclosed. "How can you be so kind to me? How can you have forgiven my wicked rudeness and ingratitude on the night of the party? I am so ashamed — so very, very much ashamed of myself."

"You exaggerate a very natural protest against a gross injustice when you say you were rude, Miss Lamont. Do you know, you courageous and heroic fighter of life's great battle single-handed, that in my belief you and I could never quarrel or fall out of sympathy? And as for rudeness, you never could be rude to any one, if you tried."

He was gone, and where he left her she spent a full hour — the very happiest hour of her life. He had come to call upon her. *He!* all the way from New York, to call upon her! And what had he said — and intended her to understand? Under no construction could his words be called merely polite. Under the narrowest construction they were — when taken in conjunction with his tone of voice — unquestionably friendly. And almost anybody would say they were — loverlike! Thus hugging to her soul the fresh bright memory of that short interview, Laura sat alone in the drawing-room an hour, blushing, trembling, smiling, dreaming the realities that were certain in due time to chase from her maiden eyes the whispering mysteries that throne themselves in virgin faces.

And he? Before half an hour had gone, he had caught up with Jack Lamont, and halted him in the road with a request for a light for his cigar. In returning the man's match-box, he delayed its delivery, purposely, for a few seconds, during which he scanned the man's face narrowly.

"Thank you," said he. "Your name's John Lamont?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, why don't you go back to New York to-day?"

"Well, upon my word!" Lamont answered, "and will you condescend to mention why I should go to New York?"

"Because you are the 'Flashlight Fiend,'" said Beekman, calmly, but with impressive confidence.

"You mean that I am your grandmother, do you not?" Lamont asked. "My poor friend, when did you escape — and where from?"

He tried to carry a nonchalant air, but his face flushed and his eyes fell before the honest man's searching gaze. He realised that his manner was betraying him, and he turned quickly to resume his way toward Fishkill.

"Will you go to New York, to-day; before I expose you?" Beekman inquired. To save his own right arm he would not have exposed the wretch. But he reasoned that Lamont would not suspect the truth.

"Seriously, sir," Lamont replied, "if you are not insane, you certainly are mistaken. Every one around here knows me. I am a Lamont, sir — of the manor-house above here, and I am a sick man, barely able to move about."

" Will you take five hundred dollars, and start at once — not to return? "

Lamont was sorely tempted, yet to accept the money was to admit his guilt. He wanted the money so badly that it angered him to have to refuse it.

" Mind your business," he snarled, " and let me alone. You are mistaken, I tell you."

" Will you take a thousand dollars, and go at once? " and Beekman produced his pocket-book to further tempt the scoundrel.

Lamont began to walk away.

" A thousand dollars! " Beekman called after him. " Will you go away for a thousand dollars down? "

" Go to —— " Lamont snarled, and kept on his way.

Courtlandt Beekman bit his lip with vexation. He was positive that he had made no mistake, he was equally certain that he could not prove his assertion, and he dared not risk a step which might bring annoyance to Laura Lamont, and thus perpetrate the very injury he was trying to prevent.

Before a week passed the " Flashlight Fiend " was at his work again, and for several weeks his depredations continued — always being confined to the same limited sphere. From one young lady in Powellton he took only a silver-buckled garter, from another a necklace, from a third a plain gold pin. Always and everywhere his thefts were trifling and of the sort that might be called the intimate ornaments of his victims — except in the case of Laura Lamont, whose pocket-book he emptied of its contents in silver and bank-notes. The press roared with sensational stories of his polite speeches, his gallant manners, and the mystery of his identity.

On one afternoon, Tonette noticed the glint of something at the edge of the hall carpet, by Jack Lamont's bedroom door. She picked up the object, which proved to be a gold pin, very plain but of such fashioning that she suspected it to be the one that the "Fiend" had contented himself with taking from the room of a Miss Viola Sedgvale, one of the most attractive of the belles of Fishkill, and the last victim of the man's operations. She took it to her room and examined it carefully, then found a copy of a newspaper containing a description of the stolen article. Assured by this that there was ground for her suspicion, she was for confiding it to Laura, but, on second thoughts, she determined first to tell York Stone, and take his advice.

That night the " Fiend " was caught.

XXVII.

THE MYSTERIOUS BURGLAR CAUGHT

> "And tell me what is crueller
> Than a wicked woman's will." — *Goethe.*

THERE had been a small gathering of friends at Harold Kimball's house in Fishkill, and two of the visitors remained after midnight, when the party broke up. These two were Henrietta Van Ness, who yielded to Harold's sister's invitation to stay the night, and a Mr. Blakeley, of New York, who remained to give Mr. Kimball what satisfaction he might for having beaten him at poker in town, a few nights before. At a little after midnight, therefore, we find the occupants of the house distributed as follows: Kimball and Blakeley at cards in a middle room on the ground floor — a room with only one window, and that completely darkened by outside shutters and heavy inner hangings; Miss Van Ness dressed and gossiping with Miss Kimball, who had gone to bed in the large room on the first floor; and, at the top of the house, the butler, three maids, and a boy servant, all asleep. When the low tones of the women's talk ceased, as it did presently, the only sounds in the house were the occasional monosyllabic utterances of the men at cards: " Raise you five," " ten better," " aces high," and the like. And this was also softened speech, for these men were businesslike at poker, which was the most serious business they ever transacted. The best card-players in our country, who are of a race and religion by themselves, play hilariously because, with them, gaming is dissipation for the commercial instinct which rules them. With Caucasians it keeps its commercial side, and is therefore apt to be taken seriously, as all business is with a people primarily agricultural. When the Caucasians are idle men of pleasure, card-playing brings the utmost mental strain to which they are subjected. That is one reason why there are no quieter places in Caucasia than its gambling hells.

" You'll find that's a nice bed in there," said Miss Kimball; " it's warm as toast."

" Then I'll brown myself on both sides," said Henrietta. " Bon soir, ma chère."

Henrietta passed into the adjoining room and, as a brilliant moon shone upon the immaculate blanket of snow in the garden, she decided to go to bed without a light. Nevertheless, an instinct which women do most to keep in force in the world led her to go to the window to close the lower shutters. As she approached the window, her eye caught a movement in the garden, and pausing to study it, she saw a man advance from a clump of bushes to cross the snow upon the lawn. As he walked, he turned to scan the windows of the house with a foxy glance which consorted with his swift but careful steps. It was the face of Jack Lamont, and she recognised it, for she had often seen him, though they were not more nearly acquainted. When he reached the farther side of the garden and the ladder which he had seen leaning against a tree there, he stopped and studied the house carefully. He did not see Henrietta.

She ran swiftly back to Miss Kimball's bedroom.

"Sh-h-h-h! Pauline, dear; don't cry out — or anything," she whispered. "There's a man in the garden, getting a ladder to climb into one of these windows. It is that Lamont who used to come so often to the Clock House, in the old colonel's time. He is stopping there now with that little cat. I will wager that he is the notorious 'Flashlight Fiend.' If he is, we will have more fun with Miss Lamont than she has had with me."

"For heaven's sake, Henrietta!" Miss Kimball exclaimed, leaping from the bed as she spoke, "and you so cool. Oh, I'm going to Harry—"

Henrietta lightly covered the frightened woman's mouth with her hand.

"There's nothing to be frightened at," she said. "We've three men in the house. I'm dressed. I'll go and get Harry and Mr. Blakeley. You tiptoe up and wake your butler."

"I like that," Miss Kimball replied, speaking almost out loud. "I'll scream with all my might, if you leave me. Do let me slip this on, and keep by you. I don't care — I'm awfully frightened — and I think you're perfectly heartless."

"Oh, do stop talking," Henrietta urged. "Come quickly. Put on your wrapper, and button it as you go."

"If I scream, he'll go away, Henrietta. He will, dear. What makes you care about that Lamont girl? Do let me scream."

Henrietta, by way of answer, stooped and took her agitated friend in her arms and carried her out, whispering, "Please be reasonable. We don't want him to get away. We want to catch him." She deposited her trembling burden in the passage, and ran back to snatch the counterpane from the bed. "There," she said, "wrap up in that. Come along."

She dashed down the stairs, and her terrified companion flung herself after her, tripping upon a dragging end of the counterpane, and crashing down several steps with a racket that must have all but reached the ears of the burglar. Henrietta was at the door of the room where the men were at cards when Miss Kimball called to her to stop.

"Heaven's sake!" Henrietta moaned; "what is it?"

"Please tell me how I look before the men —"

"You look like Sitting Bull," Henrietta said, in a whisper, and shot into the card-room.

The men followed her the instant that they grasped the news. When all were in the bedroom, she bade them stand behind the heavy drapery of the windows and wait.

"When I turn on the electric light," she whispered, "the one who is nearest the man must jump on him. Pauline, I'll get into your bed."

The instant she did so, Miss Kimball flung herself upon and around her, and pleaded to be allowed to scream.

"Hark!" from Henrietta; "there goes the ladder against the wall. Oh, what luck! What luck!"

"I think you're a devil," came from between Miss Kimball's chattering teeth.

"You ought to know, being a woman, also," Henrietta replied; "we are all half woman, half devil, and the devil-half is always on top when one of us scents revenge."

Presently the bending of the ladder was partly felt, partly heard, and then Lamont's head appeared above the outer sill with a visor, pierced, before his eyes, and covering the upper half of his face. He was now unrecognisable. Pushing up the lower sash, he let himself into the room as softly as if he had been a cat.

"What's that? Who's there?" Henrietta called out, rising upon one elbow in bed.

"A friend," Lamont whispered; "please do not be alarmed."

"Who are you?" she commanded; "leave at once. I shall scream."

"Why! it is Miss Van Ness I am addressing," said the burglar, with hushed voice. "This is an unexpected pleasure. I had meant to call upon you next week. I am the gentleman who is collecting souvenirs and portraits of the fair ladies of this neighbourhood. I give you my word, you need not be frightened. I have never done any violence, and hope never to have to, yet if you attempt to raise an alarm, I must kill you."

"What do you want here? Oh, have pity on me, and go away," Henrietta wailed, like a skilled actress.

The man began to approach the bed, taking a chair with him, from its place by the window.

"What? Miss Kimball also?" he continued. "I have never had the good fortune to be entertained by two belles at once. I want very little, ladies, — only a trifling keepsake; a pin or a bit of ribbon."

Henrietta saw that he meant to put his chair down by the head of the bed, and that if he did so she could not reach the electric button which was in the wall beside the bed. Therefore she determined to end the farce and act earnestly at once.

"Take another step at your peril, Mr. Lamont," she called aloud, and, turning, wrenched at the button and flooded the room with light. Lamont flung himself toward the window, but was pinioned at the same instant in the arms of Mr. Blakeley, a man of such physical strength that he knew resistance to be useless.

"Stick to him, Arthur," Kimball called out. "Can you hold him while I wake the servants and send for the police?"

"Take your time," was the calm answer; "I can hold him till next week."

"And I can help you, Mr. Blakeley, if it is necessary," said Henrietta, slipping out of bed and revealing herself, to Lamont's astonishment, in complete attire.

"Well done," said Lamont, bitterly. "I'm trapped like a rabbit. What an ass I was!"

"You should have kept your pranks for that little cat at the Clock House, Mr. John Lamont," Henrietta ventured, malignantly. "Is she so very fond of you? I've got a good mind to send and have her come and weep over you."

"Is this Arthur Blakeley holding me?" Lamont inquired.

"Yes."

"Arthur, old man, let me go, will you?"

"Can't do it, old fellow; awfully sorry."

"I'll leave the country if you will; on my word of honour."

"Sorry, old chap, but really — you've brought this on yourself, you know; it's your own fault."

"So help me God, I will not go to prison. I'll kill myself."

"Afraid you'll have to go," said Blakeley. "You must have known what all this would lead to."

Then Harry Kimball was heard returning and urging the sleepy butler, whose heavy steps made the stairs groan. Kimball stood at the door while Blakeley led Lamont out of the bedroom and down-stairs to the library, where the men had been playing cards. There all three sat down to await the coming of the police. Lamont's quick, ingenious mind was busied with planning a way of escape, and, as his captors were disinclined to talk, all three sat silently, Lamont staring at the floor and the others watching him. The prisoner's first idea was to ask to be left alone with Blakeley on the ground that they were old acquaintances and that he wished to confide a secret to him. Then he meant to bolt from the room and up the stairs in order to regain freedom by the window at which he entered. But then, he thought, Kimball will stand outside the door — why not make the dash while both men were behind him; or kill them both, for he was armed and they were not? Almost at the moment when he thought of murder, Mr. Blakeley asked him for his pistol, and, to disarm suspicion, he handed it over at once.

"I guess I'll have no more use for it," he said, resolving then that to bolt was the only promising plan. "Give me a cigarette, Blakeley, will you? I see you have some there."

"Certainly, old chap," Blakeley replied. "You pour him out a bracer of Scotch, Kimball, will you? No intention to treat you any worse than we have to."

Both turned their backs, and as they did so Lamont sprang to the door and out of it, then up the stairs. He slammed the library door behind him, but he heard Kimball opening it before he reached the head of the stairs. He flung himself against Miss Kimball's door and — thanked heaven that she had not locked it. He crossed her room to the shrill sound of a blood-curdling shriek, and, without stopping to walk down the ladder, spread his legs and arms and slid down its sides, thirteen feet to the ground. He fell forward on his hands and knees at the bottom, and his mind searched his body for sign of break or strain. There was none, and he instantly gathered himself to regain his feet, but, in that mere flash of a second Arthur Blakeley, who had run around the house from the library window, leaped on his back and flattened him, face down, in the snow.

"The reporter saw the prisoner in his cell." Thus began the concluding paragraph in the New York *Times* of the next day. "He has adopted a Cockney accent, and pretends to be a London cracksman, but this is futile for several reasons. He never spoke like a cockney while engaged in his burglaries; moreover, the writer of this report, the police, and many others, are able to swear that he is the well-known man about town, Jack Lamont. Besides, he betrayed himself by claiming acquaintance with Mr. Blakeley. He is thought never to have taken any photographs after all. When captured he carried only a piece of sheet iron encrusted with burnt powder, and a little gun-powder to burn upon it. He had no camera. He is said to have told Arthur Blakeley that his unquestionable aberration is a natural result of the life he has led.

" 'It's degeneration, old fellow,' he said. 'If you had not caught me, paresis would.' "

XXVIII.

DILUTING A SENSATION

"Boldly dared is won already." — *Goethe.*

LAURA LAMONT complained of poor health on the night that Jack Lamont was captured. By morning a fiery fever had developed, and this, with an excruciating headache, proved the beginning of a severe attack of influenza, which was to keep her invalided for several weeks to come. The news of Lamont's arrest reached her, in brutal fashion, while she was racked with pain. A note marked "urgent and confidential" was brought to her bedside, and she opened and read it:

"DEAR MISS LAMONT: — I think when you read this you will admit that more than one person can play at most games. You used the papers very adroitly to scandalise me in connection with the party at your house last month. Now I am using them to make public the fact that a member of your most interesting household was caught at Mr. Kimball's during the night, while I was visiting my friend, Miss Kimball. That he proved to be the notorious 'Flashlight Fiend' of this locality may not be news to one person, but the press will esteem it a matter of the first importance. I have already seen some of the reporters; others are coming.

"I am, my dear Miss Lamont,

"Your always faithful friend,

"H. V-N."

The extreme depression of spirits which accompanies severe influenza was strong upon Laura, and she threw down the cruel letter with a feeling of despondency as great as if it were she, instead of her ne'er-do-well cousin, who had been publicly disgraced. Those who have suffered a visit from that subtle foe whom the French have named La Grippe will not need to be told how quickly and completely she surrendered hope of ever outliving the disgrace that, in her fevered mind, already crushed her. Her mother and Tonette tried in vain to cheer her.

"Coming so close upon the scandal of the party," she insisted, "every one will believe the worst that Miss Van Ness will insinuate. I can never hold up my head in either Powellton or New York. The instant I am well enough I shall shut this unlucky house and leave it for ever."

I repeat this hysterical speech, well knowing that, in itself, it has no more value than the soughing of wind in a forest's tops. I have dwelt a moment, also, upon the other phases of her condition, understanding clearly that even to a medical man they have only commonplace value. And yet they are worth our attention, because it was in this state that she faced the second climax of her life, managing for the moment to thrust aside her illness, as women often can and only women are able to do, with a force of will at which the bravest men in all ages have marvelled.

On the afternoon of the day after the event, New York settled itself in its street-cars, homes, hotels, and clubs, to read the accounts of Lamont's capture. Of all the emotions it caused, and the myriad comments it provoked, two alone are of moment to the reader. These were on the part of Mrs. Percy Russell and of Courtlandt Beekman.

Mr. Russell telephoned from his office to his home for his wife to send out for an evening paper and read the report. She hastened to do so, and, after a few moments of reflection, called her husband to the telephone and told him she thought it her duty to go to Laura and be of what service she could. She reminded him of how keenly Laura had felt the previous invasion of her privacy by the newspapers, and prophesied that this new violence would leave her ill unless some true friend stood by her. In half an hour she was on her way to Powellton.

Beekman read the news while on his way downtown on the elevated railway. He left the train at the first station, crossed the avenue and took an up train back again, in order to call upon his sister, Mrs. Parmly-Fessenden. At that time the most select inner circle of the fashionable world contained no member more courted or admired than she. To the average newspaper reader her name was familiar as that of the most beautiful woman of the "Four Hundred," but there were members of that set who thought this verdict did her injustice. They knew that such beauty, blended with her impressive dignity and keen intelligence, had not been too highly praised by Millais when he said " the Greeks would have made her a goddess," nor by Daudet, whom she had known very well, and who had written, " In her presence I feel the awe which queens too seldom inspire." In her high-bred air of repose, her pride of mien and manner, in her taste and tact, she was so equipped that what it was declared that the Greeks would have done already suggested the estimate at which she was valued by those who knew her best. To her went her brother, in trepidation lest she should be away from home, and found her finishing her lunch.

" Courtlandt! " exclaimed his sister. " I was not expecting this pleasure."

" No, Clara," he said, kissing her cheek as she held her face up for the salutation; " I came upon a sudden resolution. I hope I am not *de trop.*"

" Never, Courtlandt; how could you be? "

" You were not going out — or expecting any one? "

" No; I am wholly at your service."

" I have spoken to you about Miss Lamont, Clara."

"Yes," she said, "though I have learned more from what you have not said than from the little you have. Have you met her again? No? But she interests you as much as ever; and that is a very great deal, I know. I wish I had regarded her more closely when I saw her that day in Rhinebeck. I only remember how very blond she was, and that I admired her girlish figure and frank and intelligent face. Don't grudge me the whole truth, Courtlandt, because I am sure that when you take such a fancy it is apt to be — serious, as we say. I shall be out to whoever calls, and you shall have the whole afternoon. You know that any such case is of the first interest to every woman, so you may imagine what this is to me from a brother who has so long avoided his fate."

"Thank you, Clara," he said; "I am going to impose on your kindness by asking you to go with me to pay a visit to Miss Lamont, simply to make her acquaintance. She and I are in precisely that status, by the way, so that I have no romantic revelations to make."

"I will go," Mrs. Fessenden said, "and with pleasure, if it is to oblige you."

"But she is at her home near Fishkill, and I am very much in hopes you can go directly and stay over night."

"Oh! I do not see how I can," she exclaimed, but a great change of the expression of his face caused her to alter her mind. "Yes, what I thought of doesn't matter. I will go."

She rose and went over to him to stoop and kiss his brow.

"You are *very* anxious, aren't you, Courtlandt?" she asked. "Come, tell me what makes you so. I would not presume to advise you, nor will I criticise whatever you tell me you are bent upon doing. I will simply help you to the extent of my power."

"You are as good as gold, Clara. I will tell you all the details on the cars. Can you get ready in half an hour, and drive to the Grand Central Depot? I will be there. I must first telegraph that we are coming. Miss Lamont has had an invalid cousin staying with her — a well-known man about town. He proves to be the sensational burglar who photographs his victims — about whom so much has been published; you know."

"I have heard some one speak of the case," she replied. "How very extraordinary! He is insane, of course."

"He has been caught in the house of that Kimball who is engaged to Henrietta Van Ness — in her room, while she was visiting Kimball's sister."

"How very shocking!" said Mrs. Fessenden. "And how very dreadful for poor Miss Lamont. But isn't this rather an odd moment to choose for my visit? Will she see either of us? Will she be able to, indeed?"

"That is immaterial. I will tell you everything on the train, and I'm sure you will agree with me. In a word, this is my idea: You remember that I told you of those music hall people at Henrietta Van Ness's party given at Miss Lamont's house? I showed you that paragraph about it in *Society Talk*. Well, Clara, I assure you that whole affair was such a blow to her pride and her sensitive nature that it was cruel merely to witness her suffering. This will affect her ten times as much. The first affair will be raked over and exaggerated, unless we prevent it, and she will experience an ordeal to which no innocent girl should be subjected."

"We prevent it? You and I? How?"

"By simply being at the house when the reporters call there this afternoon."

"But, my dear Courtlandt," Mrs. Fessenden exclaimed, in genuine alarm, "I cannot see the reporters. I shouldn't know — really — "

"Good gracious, Clara! I am not insane. I merely want you to be there, and them to know that you are there with me. Miss Lamont and I, if she is able, will see the reporters; if not, I will. And when they leave that house they will take away the impression that that household knows less and is less concerned about their 'huge sensation' than any other people in the country. They will believe that the routine of life is undisturbed there, and that the matter of chief moment to Miss Lamont is the entertainment of her friends."

"Really, Courtlandt, your going will be sufficient, then, and I would rather see Miss Lamont under more agreeable circumstances."

"You don't understand, Clara," said Beekman. "I promise to make it clear when there is time, on the cars. Don't you see, the Van Ness girls have been bitter enemies of the poor girl ever since *Society Talk* presented her side of the affair of the party? They will defame her if it is in their power. The meagre reports in the afternoon papers warn me what to expect tomorrow — and it will be diabolical. It is you who can prevent this, because if you are her guest every effort to harm her reputation must fall flat. Don't you see? I'm of no consequence; it's you whose presence will save her."

"I understand," Mrs. Fessenden replied. "Well, if such a little thing will curb the sensational papers it will be wonderful, but that renders it all the better worth trying. In half an hour, then, I will be on the way to the station."

Laura received the announcement of the intended visit while she was feebly welcoming Helen Russell.

"We can but wire them not to come," said that well-meaning lady; "only fancy sending the peerless Mrs. Fessenden about her business! But that is precisely what I shall have to do."

"He cannot know what has happened or he would not come. He will never think of me when he knows," Laura moaned from her bed.

"Well," continued Mrs. Russell, in ignorance of the sentimental light in which her companion had viewed Mr. Beekman ever since the first of the few occasions on which she had seen him, " it is going to be a testing of all your friends, and if he is one who cannot stand the trial, the sooner you know it the better."

" I cannot see his sister," Laura said. " My head is fairly splitting. I hope the doctor will arrive before he comes. I may only be able to sit up a few minutes, — scarcely long enough to be barely polite, I fear."

" Is he nice, dear ? " Mrs. Russell asked, for Laura's decision to leave a sick-bed to receive a caller aroused a suspicion of the truth in her mind. With a clever woman's skill she shot forth the one question most likely to produce a betrayal if anything were being hidden. " I thought him very handsome that night at the ' Boozers.' "

" Oh, yes," Laura groaned. " He's the handsomest man in all the world. It kills me to talk, Helen. As handsome as Apollo — but that's nothing, because he is so much nicer than he looks ; so kind and gentle, and yet, you know, so commanding."

" Oho! So sits the wind! " thought Helen Russell. " Don't try to talk, dear. Hark! there's the doctor's carriage."

The doctor prescribed for the allaying of the fever and headache, and ordered a tonic for her system, leaving also a command that she have perfect rest and quiet.

Beekman and his sister were met in the drawing-room by Mrs. Russell, looking grave, regretful, but very firm. Soberly, reluctantly, yet very tenaciously, she endeavoured to turn the distinguished couple back from their purpose by assuring them that Miss Lamont was seriously ill. She might as well have asked Gibraltar to declare itself a Spanish rock. Brother and sister both utterly failed to catch the ulterior suggestion in everything she said. They replied that they were not surprised, they had feared they might find her indisposed, they would be impatient until they heard the doctor's report after his next call in the evening. Mrs. Russell was puzzled and distressed. She had all but put it in so many words that they could not stay; still they did not catch her meaning. There was nothing left but to introduce Tonette, who might shock so conventional a person as Mrs. Parmly-Fessenden, yet who could be relied upon to state the case with the force and directness which characterises a bullet's course.

"May I inquire to whom we are speaking?" Beekman inquired.

"I am Mrs. Russell, a friend of Miss Lamont's."

"Are you the wife of my friend, Mr. Percy Russell?"

"My husband is the architect," Helen explained.

"Then, as he and I are old friends," said Beekman, "and as you and I are both members of the Boozers' Club, I am going to be frank with you, and explain why we are here and why I hope we may stay."

He set the case forth to her in a few sentences, yet so clearly that her face grew brighter for each link of his argument. She put herself in Laura's place as she listened, and when he had finished she thanked him from the bottom of her heart — and thanked his sister, also, though much less effusively because she was of her own sex. She gave orders to have their things taken up at once, and she accompanied Mrs. Fessenden to the best chamber, from which the miscreant Lamont's belongings had already been removed. When a chance offered, she flew to Laura's bedside and told her that Mr. Beekman was "too nice for anything," and that his sister possessed in her one heart all the humanity and kindness needed to equip the entire Four Hundred, with more of the same effervescent and geyser-like nature. As a peroration, she explained why the brother and sister were there. "To silence scandal, darling, and thwart that detestable Van Ness tiger-cat," she said. "I declare the man is Napoleonic."

The first few reporters who called were asked to return with all the others who were "working up the case" at six o'clock in the evening. Laura came down dressed as for an evening party, and looking her best; perhaps better than she had ever appeared, so rosy had the scorch of fever turned her cheeks, so brilliant was the cruel light it shot through her eyes. Mrs. Russell begged her to go back to her bed, and Beekman, though he found it hard to believe she was ill until he took her burning hand in his, also pleaded with her not to risk a more serious sickness. She was introduced to Mrs. Fessenden, whose good-will she quickly won by her bright manner and artless nature. The reporters were even more easily captivated. She told them she had seen very little of her cousin, and could not offer much to gratify their curiosity. They read to her, with their own ends in view, their interviews with Henrietta Van Ness — full of insinuations and innuendoes unworthy even such a source — but they apologised as they did so, and assured Laura that her statement rendered it unlikely that any reputable newspaper would devote much space to gossip so evidently malicious.

The presence of the celebrated hunter, explorer, and author deeply impressed these young men, whose entire guild held him in high esteem, valuing him for the frequent good "copy" his life provided, and esteeming him for his romantic adventures, which they exaggerated, and with the halo of which he was wholly enveloped in their mind. Eagerly they took note of his presence, and of that of his sister, and after the ladies had left the room they lingered to talk with him. When he bade good-night to the last one, he felt no anxiety with regard to the form the news would take in the morning papers. He knew that the reports would all agree in declaring Jack Lamont partially insane, and to that extent irresponsible for his actions. Of the culprit's infirmity of mind Beekman felt himself safe in assuring the reporters that ample proof would be forthcoming.

Laura presided at that night's dinner in her home and never appeared to greater advantage. This was her heroism. To be so ill, in such exquisite pain, to feel such utter despondency through the knowledge that her cousin had brought public disgrace upon her — to feel all this, and yet to thrust it aside and preside at her table (before him whom she ranked first among men) as if in perfect poise, — what man lives who could have done this? Even among women, how few could have done it so well.

Toward the end of the dinner the doctor returned and, with alarm and indignation, commanded her to return to her bed. Her guests took side against her and, when Beekman and his sister threatened to go back to New York unless she obeyed her physician, she reluctantly yielded. Beekman offered his arm with courtly formality to escort her from the dining-room. Once in the hall, she tremblingly asked him to allow her to keep his arm until they had mounted the stairs. In the upper hall, where they were alone for a moment, she confessed that she was very ill and so low-spirited as to fancy she had not long to live, or, indeed, much to live for.

" Try to remember for one year what you are saying now," said he. " Shall I write it down and save it, to show to you in twelve months? How we will laugh over it, then."

" No, no; I cannot joke about it. I am in earnest. I know that I shall never be strong or of much use again."

" And yet I would try to recover if I were you," Beekman said, still making light of her despondency. " There are a few little trifles that need your care; your villagers, you know; and that wicked tavern which will work havoc if you neglect to watch it. And, then again, there is another trifle in which I am deeply interested that needs your interest. I would plead for it if I dared."

" Why, what is it?"

" Myself, Miss Lamont."

" I do not understand," she said.

"I would plead that you might take an interest — ever so much or ever so little, as you will, in me and in my life."

"Oh, I do, I do," said Laura. "How rude I have been not to tell you before this how deeply I appreciate the great kindness you have done me to-day. I am sincere. I want to call you — to your face — my friend. No other in all the world has been so kind to me."

"Miss Lamont," said he, gravely, "in that I am only selfish. I have tried to win your gratitude — because — I love you. Am I wrong to tell you now? I love you. I came to your party solely to be near you. I have come to-night for the same reason; to be with you and to show you that I love you."

"Oh, Mr. Beekman! You are cruel! Don't—" she almost gasped, out of her surprise and her distorted view of the honour he paid her.

"I have never loved any other woman — and never shall," he whispered. "May I hope to win your love?"

"I am not worthy of so much," she said, and, staggering against him, hid her face on his breast. He put an arm about her and kissed her.

And to him this was a covenant.

XXIX.

A MESSAGE FOR BRYAN CROSS

> **" A thousand fantasies . . .**
> **Of calling, shapes and beckoning shadows dire." — " Comus."**

TO the surprise of Laura, who fancied that Mrs. Fessenden's pride and dignity betokened a shell-clad heart, that lady spent an hour or more of the next morning by the invalid's bedside, soothing her with hopeful, sympathetic talk, administering her medicine, frequently altering the position of her pillows to maintain her comfort, and, in manifold ways, exhibiting the genius of an instinctive nurse.

" Courtlandt has whispered to me that he hopes we are to become sisters; I am so glad, dear! " she whispered.

" No, no! " Laura cried from the depths of the melancholia that possessed her; " it is only sympathy, not love, that he feels for me. I will tell him — when I am better. I can bring him nothing but misfortune."

"That is not kind," said Mrs. Fessenden. "I know that he has loved you since the moment he first saw you. It was your low spirits that spoke then, not the brave, high-spirited girl whom he loves so very deeply. Be sure he will never change, dear Laura. I am so glad. You are a little witch, dear. You exact love from all who ever see you. Will you not try to love me, also, and let us be like sisters?"

A hysterical attack of crying was all the answer Laura could give.

Mr. Beekman took his sister back to the city that afternoon, leaving Mrs. Russell to wait upon Laura, with Tonette's help, until he could send a trained nurse. With infinite trouble that nurse was selected by his going to house after house, and calling up physician after physician on the telephone, until he had learned the names of three or four nurses who were declared to be amiable and ladylike as well as skilful. Having found such an one who was disengaged, he went with her to Powellton. He installed himself at the village hotel, and remained there a month, going to the Clock House three times a day during the fortnight of Laura's confinement to her room, and spending every afternoon with her afterward when she was able, first, to come down to the common rooms of the house, and afterwards, to drive out with him.

Sensational recitals of the nocturnal exploits of the pervert, Jack Lamont, filled broadsides of the newspapers for several days, and during that time it was a labour of love to Beekman to make certain that neither printed word nor gossip about the case reached the invalid's room. Her miserable, morally wrecked cousin was declared insane, and removed to an asylum. And there, at last, the curtain fell upon that repellent scene in the outskirts of our heroine's life, never to be raised again.

On one afternoon, while Laura was still very weak and confined to her bed, Tonette ran down the garden path to meet Beekman among the trees and speak to him before he entered the house. She had been at an upper window watching for him.

"You've heard of the Rev. Bryan Cross?" she called.

"Good-afternoon, Tony; yes, I've heard of him."

"He's a friend of Miss Laura's, you know. Well, he's in there. I've got him corralled in the library, with the butler at the door and the groom on the first landing, to throw him if he tries to stampede. He allows he's got to see Miss Laura. He says it's a matter of life and death, and that sort of foolish talk. I've told him he can go up when the doctor comes, and he's waiting. I'm a-scared of him — he's so queer. Mr. Beekman, he's got wheels; the real kind that belongs in an 'sylum. Any minute, he's liable to break a trace and bust right into Miss Laura's room, and that'll kill her."

"I declare, Tony, I'm glad you found me," Beekman said. "We'll give him the wrong scent, somehow, as your father would say."

"Like paw would say? Like he does, I reckon you mean, whenever a tenderfoot blows in the hotel. Wouldn't you like to see paw, though? Bet I would. I don't reckon you care, though, — 'cause you're trailing something better than elk just now, ain't you, Mr. Beekman?" And Tonette bounded out of his reach, with a laugh at her own impudence.

When Beekman went into the library he almost fancied it an optical illusion that the man who rose and advanced with a hesitating, questioning air should be so startlingly like the Hamlet of the greatest American tragedian of a recent day. Cross had the same height and thinness, the same facial pallor and long black hair; and, in the half darkness, his black clothing appeared in keeping with the weird suggestion. It was as if he was Hamlet leaving Horatio's side and advancing cautiously to question his father's ghost.

"Mr. Cross, I think. I am Courtlandt Beekman, at your service. I am asked to see you on behalf of Miss Lamont."

"Why do I see everybody else? I want to see her," Cross said, peevishly. His voice trembled like that of a very sick man, and his utterance was thick. A lean yellow hand went trembling, first to his chin and then to push back his jet hair where it had fallen over one of his ears.

"It's too bad," Beekman replied, "but you cannot see her. She is ordered to be kept perfectly quiet."

"When will she die?" Cross inquired, with a gleam of cunning in his eyes and a confidential tone of voice. He was repellently eager. "Is it to be to-day?"

"She's not going to die," Beekman answered. "She's only ill of influenza."

"Don't trifle," said Cross, petulant again; "I know she is going to die. That is why I have come. I must see her first. It is the chance of my life. Life, did I say? It's the only hope for my soul."

"Please sit down, sir," said Beekman. "Now, then, tell me quite calmly, why you want to see her."

"Don't you know?" Cross inquired. "Every one knows. You see, when my sister died, I did not ask her to send me word from the other shore. I meant to, but I didn't — didn't dare. I thought, too, that as we had always known each other's thoughts, she must divine my wish. As she had been my best friend, another self to me, I felt certain she would know my peril without being told. And if she is in heaven she must know now; why doesn't she speak to me? What do you think? Isn't that alone sufficient to raise doubts? She has been dead for months and sends me no word. I tried to travel, but" — here the cunning look crept back into his eyes, as he put a limp finger up to his trembling lips — "but

I saw I had better be back in her bedroom. There is where she will come to tell me; that is, she will, if there is a hereafter. Oh, why doesn't she come? I am so worn with waiting."

"You want a proof that there is a hereafter?" Beekman replied, inquiringly.

"How else can I preach?" Cross pleaded. "My God, how else can I live? She almost cursed me for my doubts, which I tried so hard to conceal. After she died, she came to me in the pulpit, and charged me with being a coward — a quack. Every night I pray for tidings of her when three months shall have gone. That will be on this coming Friday, you see."

"Then you're all right as rain, aren't you?"

"Yes, if there is another life I can hear from her and I can return to my pulpit," said the wretched man, talking on, as if mechanically. "But suppose she does not communicate — can not, for some reason. That will prove nothing. I've been thinking of that. I must have other friends where she has gone; so, lately, I've been among the poor and have found three who were dying, — two women and a man. I got them to promise to tell me quickly, after they died, but they have not spoken or made a sign, though two have been dead a fortnight. They were not my friends, after all, and other things may be distracting them from thoughts of me. It will not be so with Miss Lamont. She is my friend. On her and my sister I must put my chief reliance; don't you think so? For pity's sake, let me see her; she is too good to leave a soul in such a hell of doubt."

Beekman managed the unhappy man adroitly, so as to arouse neither his suspicion nor combativeness. He pretended to carry Cross's message to the invalid's bedside, from which he affected to return with the word that Miss Lamont regretted the necessity for disappointing her old friend, yet was obliged to insist that she was not in a way to die; a gravely funny message whose humour wholly escaped the excited visitor.

This assurance had to be strengthened by many repetitions and variations before the distracted clergyman would accept it. At last, he was spurred to abandon his design, upon Beekman's suggestion that he should be away looking about New York for some other, more expeditious messengers.

"Well, it looks as though I had deceived myself," Cross said, with infinite weariness in his voice. "I do not want her to die; that would be cruel — but if she should change for the worse, do get her promise for me. The notices of her life in the papers put it in my head that the editors had secret word that she was dying, and I fancied God meant her to be His messenger to me. I have lived under this strain ever since I left college; I can wait till Friday for my sister's message, but not much longer."

Beekman walked with him to the Fishkill station, and did not bid him good-bye until he had seen him seated in a moving train for New York.

On the morning of the following Sunday, the papers contained the news of his release from suffering. He was found upon his back on the floor of the bedroom in which his sister died. It was evident that he had been writing in his diary and had fallen from a chair, which was found overturned in front of the little white desk. What he had written was published in all the newspapers, and commented upon as mysterious. The madness it betrayed was evident, but its source was, happily for his memory, far less apparent.

"The time has come, and my sensations apprise me that the message will soon be delivered. At times, I think it will, in some way, be spoken within me, for my head feels bursting, swollen, under awful internal pressure.

"The air is full of murmuring voices and pulsates with waves of soft light which strengthen and quicken as the minutes speed.

"These signs are in themselves the thing I seek. They tell me that He rules, that life survives the earth.

"An hour has gone. The murmur is a tumult. The once luminous breathings are now terrible bolts of lightning. I am not afraid though each shock threatens destruction. Is it the world's ending? No, for all is calm out-of-doors.

"The convulsion is close about me. It is awful beyond words.

"It is the message at last. I cannot write — "

XXX.

HAPPY CAPTIVES OF LOVE

> "Will ye wed with one another?
> And we smiled and we answered 'Yea!'"— *Goethe.*

MRS. FESSENDEN, Laura Lamont, and Courtlandt Beekman were resting in camp chairs in front of the cottage they had hired at Biloxi, in the sunniest and most characteristic if not the most beautiful spot in our Sunny South. The lethargic population of the village kept within doors, sleeping in all probability, as it spends most of its time in doing, and the whole external prospect was theirs. The tawny road beside the gulf, the stony beach, the wide blue expanse of sea, with Mr. Beekman's shiplike steam yacht nestling on its smooth surface, the cedar-scented air, the calm, the inexpressible restfulness that becomes torpor to those who spend their lives there — all this was theirs, prized for its curative effect upon Miss Lamont.

Mr. Beekman was showing Laura a scrapbook which he had filled with the notices of her philanthropic work, that had appeared in the newspapers of the Hudson River Valley and New York during her illness. Pieced together they made a printed ribbon fifty feet long. Otherwise arranged they had covered the top of his single bed in the Powellton hotel. With joy and pride he exhibited the volume they made when pasted in scrapbook formation. Politely she glanced at the first few pages, and then closed the book and handed it back to him.

"Honestly," she said, "I do not like it. I would rather you would keep the collection, since I know you feel differently about it. Above all else, I hoped that the little I was able to do in Powellton and Wapata might be carried on quietly, without attracting public attention. The notoriety it has now got, and even the praise of the newspapers, distress me as much as the slander with which they visited me at first. Believe me, Courtlandt, if I should read all those articles I could never again feel the same interest in the experiment I was trying among my neighbours."

"Why, Laura, you are most unreasonable," Mrs. Fessenden remarked. "You can never have seriously imagined that you could carry on very quietly a scheme so extensive and novel. Besides, you have no right to deny to the world the example and incentive of such an undertaking."

"I loathe notoriety," Laura replied, a trifle testily, for she was still far from being her old self again; "I am a private individual, and I hold my privacy sacred. I cannot help it if I am unreasonable; it is in my blood to wish to live apart from newspaper meddling and popular gossip. The trespass of the public upon my personal affairs hurts me every time it occurs as much as if the people walked with hob-nailed shoes over my bared heart."

"But in this case the editors are true to their best aims in exploiting what you have done," Beekman insisted. "I am sure that when you are stronger you will see this. To me, every word of this that you call 'notoriety' is precious, and yet I resent mistaken newspaper enterprise as much as any man alive. I had been proud of you for your goodness without realising a hundredth part of its depth and breadth. While I waited for you to mend, I gradually discovered that you were the idol of all the people where you have your home. They all but revere you. They were so angered at the malicious insinuations of the Van Ness sisters to the reporters that any irresponsible man could easily have led them to drive those women out of Fishkill — even to pull down their house upon their heads. But it was not until I read the papers upon the subject that I knew the extraordinary grounds for your popularity.

" See here," he continued, " allow me to read the summing up in *The Sun,* of what its reporter learned about your work: ' It is the unanimous testimony in the two villages that both communities have been raised in prosperity and comfort to such an extent that all the shops now keep entirely different stocks of goods from those they used to carry — more varied and of higher quality, and vastly better graded than the goods on sale in other similar villages. Their business has changed from a credit to a spot-cash basis. Eighty-five new accounts have been opened in the Fishkill bank by Miss Lamont's associates — or partners, as she calls them — and a bank is about to be started in Powellton. Two drinking saloons have failed and closed up; the Powellton hotel being now the only drinking and loafing place for the two villages. A small " slum " which existed in Wapata has been bought by speculators, who have razed the buildings, and are erecting a block of tidy two-story dwellings. As to Wapata, it may be said that a third of it was unkempt, more or less filthy, and inhabited by slothful, dissolute, and disorderly persons. To-day the drones are reforming or moving off, and the little quarrying and carpet-making community is rapidly getting started on the way to become a tree-lined, flower-decked garden spot like Powellton.' "

" Do you wonder," Beekman inquired, " that such miracles, performed within a little more than three years, got publicity in the press? The real wrong, it seems to me, would have been to keep this from the public."

" Really, it sounds to me as if it were about some one else," Laura remarked, while her friends noted the colour flow to her face, as if her sensations were not wholly unpleasant. " I do wish they had waited till we got beyond the experimental stage, and had made large profits and invested them in parks or playgrounds and a kindergarten and library, as we are hoping to do. Such things, done by the plain people with their own money — as they will be done — would be better worth writing about than the very little the papers have found to make so much out of."

"I told the landlady and her daughters at the hotel that I was coming there to see their orange-trees," said Mrs. Fessenden, rising from her chair; "I think I will go now. I will be with you again in a few minutes."

"Don't be late for lunch, Clara," Beekman called after her.

"Courtlandt," said Laura, "I am glad of a chance to speak to you alone. I think I feel oversensitive about the newspapers, because before this they have described me as if I were a frivolous, idle, mere society woman. I have been disturbed by criticisms of what is called 'fashionable life,' until I have a guilty feeling about even my most informal social relaxations."

"That is, Bryan Cross has talked to you, or you have read his diatribes," Beekman suggested.

"Not he alone, poor man, by any means,"

Laura answered. " But you have read what he had to say; what do you think of his arguments?"

" He was unbalanced," Beekman replied. " He saw the evils of the overvaluing of both money and commercial success, and he may have been right in his diagnosis of the situation as it affects the 'new rich' and the mass of the poor. It would be natural, where success in money-making is held too high, that unconcern for the laggards in the race for wealth should follow. I only say it seems logical; really, I have no means of testing that point. But his fault was in ascribing all these things to 'Society,' and in condemning all polite circles for the faults of a few of their members. A large number of those who imitate the polite world may be, as he said, living beyond the limits of prudence, and that also may be the direct result of what he called 'dollar-worship,' but surely a very general cultivation of pride of family and of dignity of position — or of the ambition to acquire good manners — cannot be harmful in itself."

"You speak of the 'polite world,'" was Laura's retort, aimed straight at the mark; " you admit its existence, but is it not itself an imitation of a monarchical product?"

"Well, you might as well say it is an imitation of what existed earlier among our Indians, and of conditions found in every one of those Russian villages, which are among the purest types of democratic institutions. But to speak more seriously, 'Society' seems to me the inevitable expression of the natural ambition of mankind. In civilisation certainly, and perhaps in barbarism, 'Society' is the organised influence of the women upon the social body. It is the best and most powerful expression of their refining and gentling influence—unless their zeal in religion comes first. Our best society in New York was once proud to honour and entertain men like Washington Irving, N. P. Willis, Bayard Taylor, George William Curtis, and Thackeray, when he came over. It does not do so now because it is temporarily influenced by those who share the national tendency to exaggerate the importance of material success. But that is only a phase. It does not alter the bottom fact that where there are different grades of intelligence, of cultivation, and of ambition some must be higher than others, and one of each must cap its class. My great-grandmother entertained Washington, her daughter was once hostess to Lafayette; my mother also brought me up in pride of our standing among the leaders of social life and the defenders of the public welfare in New York. I hope, Laura, that my wife will shine there as a hostess, as a champion of the dignity of social position and as a patriotic American. I am very sure that she will never allow her sympathies for the unsuccessful to be weakened, and it may be that the other so-called fashionable folk will copy a few pages out of her book."

"I cannot imagine myself your wife, dear," she said. "I am not worthy, Courtlandt. You shall not ever say I deceived you in that respect."

"You think yourself unworthy of such a mere Arab as I," he said, "while I know I am not fit to share your beautiful life. I'll tell you what: we will leave it to Clara, and do as she says."

"No, no!" she cried, in pretended terror, clinging to his coat as if to hold him near her. "She is a woman, and can see through and through me. She would decide against me, and I should lose you — and have nothing left but to die."

At Laura's suggestion both rose and walked along the beach.

"I had a letter from Mrs. Percy Russell this morning," said she. "She reports my mother very happy with her, and I am sure she is so, for she is very fond of Mrs. Russell, who, in her turn, is all patience and goodness with poor mamma."

"What other news is in her letter?"

"Oh, only that my cousin Archie is feeling the arms of his chair at the Madison Club develop muscles and enclose him in a more than human grasp, against which he is not disposed to struggle, since he has himself grown to be little better than another bit of the club furniture. Oh, yes, and she says that a grand 'Boozers' night' is being arranged to welcome us back to town."

"Have you heard from Tonette?" Beekman asked.

"Not since I told you that she wrote to say that I need not fear she would not make a good wife to a clergyman. I still have my doubts, just the same. They will set the day for their wedding whenever they are certain I will be at home to attend it."

"Here comes my sister," Beekman said.

"I am going to ask her to let me call her Clara," Laura answered.

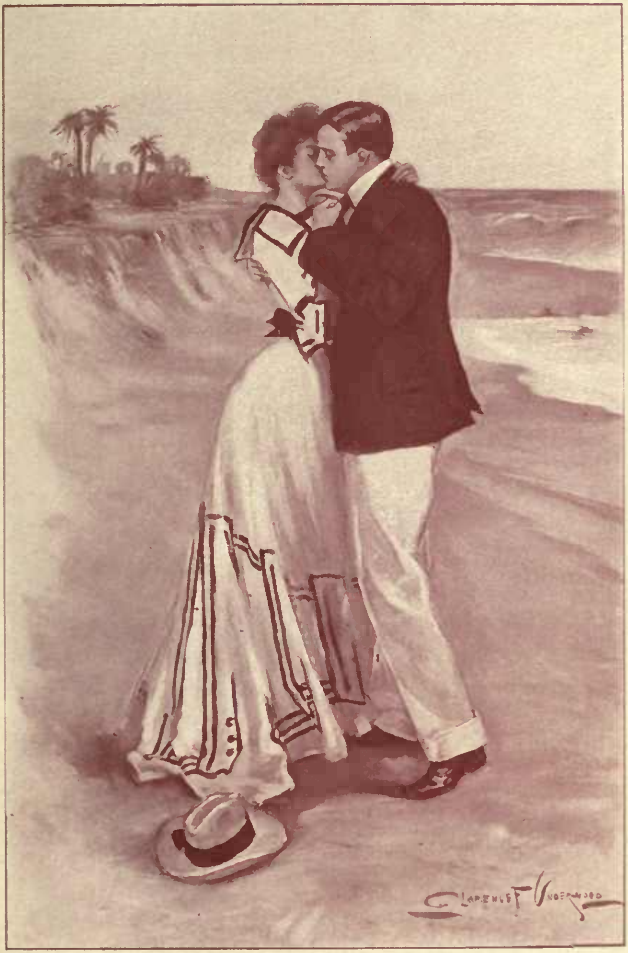
"Bless you," Courtlandt said, "that means that you have at last put aside your doubts, and will acknowledge yourself my own, my precious. Why will you not tell me so, and let us both make Clara as happy as we shall then become?"

"When I think of being anything else, it is like death. I know I am not worthy, yet I know, too, that I am yours, Courtlandt. If I have not said the words 'I love you,' it is because I love you too much and have been frightened by it. Oh, you cannot know how much I love you."

The place where they stood was sheltered from the road, and only the waters of the gulf, glaring in the sun like a huge deadeye, commanded a view of them. Laura hesitated, looked about her with a quick sweep of her eyes, and flung herself in his arms.

"Oh, I have been so lonely — so all alone," said she, and he drew her closer to him.

Her exclamation was the feminine summary of a quick retrospect of her maiden career. She was on the point of confessing the whole of her heart's


Clarence F Underwood

"HE KISSED HER LIGHTLY, AND THE TOUCH OF HIS LIPS — LIFTED HER SOUL"

little story, and yet, as she thought it over — thought of Archie Paton and York Stone — she saw that she must not risk his misunderstanding her. Fortunately, her conscience fully cleared her. She felt so drawn to Courtlandt that she believed herself in love. She had no doubt of it, though others might reason that her feelings were wholly a blending of admiration and respect. "No," she told herself, "I will not throw a cloud over our bliss. I did not love Archie or Mr. Stone. They cannot have imagined such a thing. I never could have given myself to any one but Courtlandt — my lover and my beloved." Thus she contradicted the first promptings of her conscience and, to end the confusion, threw herself in Courtlandt's arms, crying:

"Oh, I have been so lonely! so all alone!"

And as he drew her close to him, he bent his head and kissed her — not with a passionate kiss which would have taken advantage of her surrender and would have wounded her like a red quivering mark of a lash across her soul. He kissed her lightly, and the touch of his lips on her brow lifted her soul, like her reverential thoughts of marriage, until it trembled with misgivings — as well as with delight. With such love, after having yielded to it as she had now done, there was no more fear for the future in her heart than there was in his.

"You shall never be lonely again," he said.

THE END.

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